BATTLESTAR GALACTICA

REBELLION



RICHARD HATCH

and ALAN RODGERS

A NEW NOVEL BASED ON THE UNIVERSAL TELEVISION SERIES CREATED BY GLEN A. LARSON

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Battlestar Galactica Rebellion by Richard Hatch

Chapter One

FOR A man who lived almost all his life in space, Apollo had a planet-bound dream. Imagine a planet tearing itself apart; a glowing rock heart melting and bursting from continent-sized cracks. All that was, sinking.

Volcanoes exploding. Molten magma running brilliant red down black mountains.

Apollo dreamt this. The lava licked at his heels as he ran. If he paused for a micron, it would swallow him whole.

He'd wake, covered in sweat, breathing hard, legs cramping. How could a man run so hard in his sleep? Why would a space-flown man dream of what destroys great planets? You'd think a battlestar, or a Viper or a Cylon basestar, better still.

But it was planet-bound, not flying, but running. Feet, not a Viper's magic wings.

Every time Apollo woke from this dream, he felt like he'd escaped that danger as if it were real. He'd outrun the volcano, something no man could ever do outside of a dream. And as the frantic, desperate need to run faded, Apollo would take a deep breath, feeling the sweet, real air filling his lungs, and hold it for microns. Then let it out, and feel his heart expanding with

relief. You made it this time, he'd think. And then came the joy: You're alive.

The planet was Kobol. And the destruction was real. Iblis meant to make Hades real and take his revenge; out of their hope for the future, he'd trapped them all. But this one time, they were all dreaming together in that potential moment of complete destruction; the Cylons were blasted into oblivion, and victory had been snatched in the last moments of desperate struggle.

The Light Ship had risen from Kobol's ashes like a phoenix. But the dream remained; the nightmare was over. Apollo was running; they were all running, because they were men and women, not immortal birds or beings of light. Their ships were made of metal worked by their own hands.

They were free, because their hearts had led them to this place. And the same as Apollo felt free when he woke from that dream, the survivors of the Battle of Kobol gathered on the bridge of the *Galactica* in freedom and celebration.

A real battle, the greatest they had ever fought. Part of it was won in a dream. Because Apollo reached out, and found he was not alone. Athena was there, and like a miracle, she heard the coordinates that led the fleet free.

It was beyond any one man's thoughts; maybe this dream was the way that Apollo could make sense of it. Not all of time and space, but just one planet. Not every human who ever lived, but just him. Just his feet, carrying him as fast as he could go.

But they were all safe.

In that moment.

"To Apollo!" Tigh cried, raising a glass of ambrosa, his dark eyes shining.

Apollo shook his head. They were celebrating! Escape—victory! He wasn't in his quarters, and he wasn't on Kobol, and he wasn't…

"I'm back now," he told everyone.

The glory of victory still shone like the Light Ship, but there were spots of darkness in it still. They had lost so much. There were faces that should have been around that table that would never be seen again. One face, one heroic soul—maybe he sat there in spirit, Apollo thought. Cain. You ran fast because someone helped you, Apollo thought. Someone who gave his life and his battlestar, and all of the others on the *Pegasus*. Cain, never thinking twice, rammed the *Pegasus* straight down the Cylons' throats.

That was a meal that Iblis' had never planned on eating; and maybe Cain had bought them all time and bought them all a real chance at a future.

"I'm running," Apollo said.

"What?" Starbuck asked, taking Apollo's arm. "Have a drink! Are you crazier than you look? We did it!"

Apollo shook his head. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was lucky. He hadn't outrun the danger; somebody else had taken it for him. Cain. Nothing comes without a price, Apollo thought. But the truth was, he thought as he looked over at Athena, her hair and face shining in joy, neither he nor Athena had really paid the price.

But nobody else thought that. The joy was real. The love was real. Suddenly, Apollo felt his eyes stinging. There was Bojay, telling a joke, then Sheba running toward him, grabbing his waist and whispering something in his ear. The look on Bojay's face was worth surviving the battle.

"Now we can go on!" Tigh cried, raising his glass again.

We can go faster, Apollo thought. But as Starbuck said, you got what you paid for. And what a price it had been. Kobol lost. Cain and the *Pegasus*: gone. But thanks to what they had found on Kobol, they had learned to use the QSE technology and they knew that their journey had hope. They knew where to go. They could outrun the devastation. His feet were still moving. They were all running together.

You're not alone, Apollo. You're the least lonely man who ever lived, he told himself.

Nobody ever had better friends, he thought. Tigh was even starting to sing. If that wasn't joy, Apollo didn't know what was. Starbuck grabbed Apollo's shoulder.

"We're free," Starbuck said. He moved his furaarello to the other side of his mouth.

Apollo looked into his friend's face and thought, "You'll never know the nightmares I have, buddy," but what he said was, "Yeah. We did!" Then he put his arm around Starbuck's shoulder and they both began to grin and then laugh.

"Wait! Wait!" Tigh said, interrupting his song. Suddenly Tigh's expression changed. His eyes grew serious, and he waved his arms to get everyone's attention.

Apollo saw Cassi in a brief flash, her lovely eyes focused on Tigh. Athena joined in, moving close to Tigh, and linking her arm with his. She gestured toward Sheba and Bojay with her free hand. Bojay looked confused, but Apollo saw that Sheba realized what Tigh and Athena meant to do, and who they didn't want to forget.

Tigh raised his glass. "We can't forget," he said. "To Cain!"

The uproar faded. Sheba drew her hand through her hair, and the wild joy that had been on her face faded. Apollo saw a flash of Cain in her feminine features; she wouldn't cry—not Sheba. But she reached up and snatched Tigh's glass from his hand with her warrior-quick reflexes.

Then in a flash, she turned, hurling it across the room, where it crashed at Dalton's and Troy's feet. Dalton's eyes went wide, and then she turned to Troy and laughed out loud, kicking at the shards of glass.

"To my father!" Sheba cried.

"To Cain! Cain!" everyone cried.

No matter how they cheered, they could never bring him back, Apollo thought.

But he raised his glass, too. "He did not die in vain," Apollo said.

"We're free!" Starbuck cried.

And the uproar began again. Sheba, her face a mixture of grief and pride. Bojay, grinning, amazed at his luck that Sheba had chosen *him*. Apollo saw her look at him for the briefest moment, but he didn't understand the expression on her face. Starbuck, looking at Athena like she was more desirable than vast stacks of cubits. Cassi, her hair shining, face full of wonder and joy. Apollo saw the strangest, most fleeting look of worry darken her soft features, but he thought, she's just remembering Cain; they were very close. Troy, hugging Dalton, then lifting her into the air as she laughed. Trays, knocking back something dangerous-looking in a narrow flask, reaching for a fumarello sticking out of Boomer's pocket. Boomer, slapping Trays' hand away with an ominous expression on his face.

You're the luckiest man in the world, Apollo thought. These are the best people in the world. The Lords let you survive. They gave you a…

The lights flickered.

Then, for a micron, they went out. When they came again, they were dim.

Boomer's voice was loud enough under normal circumstances, but everyone stood in confused silence, so his voice echoed when he said, "That's not right."

Apollo turned instantly to the *Galactica's* readout banks. And everything shrank to a pinpoint.

"That can't be," he said.

"What in Hades?" Starbuck said, leaning over.

Soon, Tigh and Athena were there. "Every Tylium reactor in the fleet," Tigh said slowly.

After a micron, Athena said the word they were all thinking. "Dead," she said.

"No fracking way," Starbuck said. But his eyes were wide with alarm and disbelief.

How are you going to outrun anything now, Apollo thought, even as he sprang into action.

Tylium ran the engines that moved the fleet across and through and beyond the stars, the life support that let them breathe and thrive, and it powered the matter rearranges that fed and clothed them all. The fleet was already pushed beyond its limits—food, manpower, fuel—the Tylium was their last source of renewal. And all the celebrating aside, Apollo knew that they had to regroup and renew food, supplies, material—every single thing after they'd foiled Iblis' plans and escaped the destruction of Kobol.

"Engineering! Get those Tylium reactors back online! Do it *now*!"

Athena touched his shoulder. "Look out the forward port. See for yourself."

He looked up and to his left, saw the majestic and imposing spacescape before them. His lips moved. He looked back at Athena. Her eyes were narrow. Everyone began to gather around.

The stars were gone. Space wasn't black. It was white and… well, almost like milk. "Where in the halls of Hades are we?" Apollo asked.

Athena couldn't answer. Nobody could.

Whatever it was, it had caught Apollo's heels. It had cut off his legs! They'd faced down the Cylon and Chitain fleets. They'd escaped the destruction of Kobol; Iblis hadn't won. They had the QSE technology. The Light Beings had shown them the way. There was hope.

But where were they?

The milky stuff before them looked like clouds of space dust, debris, and primordial plasm. Apollo realized that they were completely dead in this…

whatever it was. Some unknown force had stolen their inertia; at the same time it had stopped the Tylium fire that drove the fleet's engines.

If it had not, the fleet would have foundered in the clouds exactly the way a fleet of wooden sailing ships might founder on an unexpected shoal of rocks at sea.

The audio comm crackled.

"Bridge, this is maintenance. I'm in the *Galactica's* main Tylium reactor—it's stone cold dead, Apollo. The reactors haven't shut down, or even failed in any ordinary sense: The Tylium reaction has just *stopped*."

"We'll be right down," he said, his heart pounding. He looked over at Starbuck—he didn't have to ask to have Starbuck follow.

Athena and Tigh remained on the bridge to calm the others and keep watch over the fleet. Before they left, Athena turned and said, "*Daedalus* too." Everything in the fleet. Wherever they were, they were all dead together.

The power core aboard the *Galactica* is a series of subdivided chambers, arranged in a chain so that they can only be accessed in sequence. This is mostly a function of security design: It would be unfortunate to have civilians—or even inappropriate engineering staff—wander into the control terminal array, much less the power cabling clusters. And stars forefend anyone accidentally finding themselves in the Tylium reactor bays: Tylium is a safe, clean fuel, producing no excesses of radiation, but all the same the raw gigajoules of energy that course through a Tylium reactor are enough to vaporize anyone unwary enough to stick a finger into the wrong socket.

Under ordinary circumstances, getting to the ultimate door that opens onto the Tylium reactor bays can take half a centar, or more. The doors are set to give long and interesting safety lectures to one and all before opening—command personnel not excepted.

The chief engineers can bypass the threshold homily in the event of a serious emergency, but doing so causes a shrill alarm to sound on the bridge.

All of that because the Tylium reactors run mostly without servicing; they have no moving parts and rarely need the attention of an engineer. The reactor bays are designed specifically to discourage unnecessary access.

And that is why, when Apollo reached the ultimate door in engineering and found it propped open by a chair, he couldn't believe it.

"What's going on?" he demanded.

Starbuck, at Apollo's side, went more directly to the point. "Are you people trying to kill yourselves? Or set off a chain reaction?"

The senior engineer, Nilsen, snorted at him.

"Not a chance, Starbuck," he said. He was kneeling beside the reactor. He had the shielded and armored door open, and was looking into the reaction chamber—the chamber that should have been siphoning the raw light and force of the Tylium's controlled explosion down into energy transducers that powered the *Galactica* —its engines, its life support, everything aboard the ship came ultimately from Tylium.

"See for yourself. It's gone cold. No reaction. It's almost as though something's transmuted the Tylium into lead."

"'Transmuted'?" Starbuck asked. "Alchemy? Be serious."

Nilsen shrugged. "I'm no scientist," he said. "Just an engineer. I'm not the one to explain it, but I can tell you what's happening: not a damn thing." He reached in and tapped the Tylium sphere with his thumb. "Stone cold—the transducers have siphoned them down to room temperature. We're in a universe of trouble."

He chuckled at the little joke he'd made—strictly speaking, the place between a starship's jump coordinates *was* another universe—think of it as an *Ur* universe, a river under time. In most contexts it's irrelevant, and little thought of. For the most part, a starship will spend only a few nano-microns at a time in that place between jumps.

Nilsen was still laughing.

"It's not funny," said a familiar voice—it was Lorrins, the physicist, standing in the doorway. "This can't happen. If there's Tylium in there, the reaction should still be hot, even with the door open. I'd close that door if I were you. If it can stop for no reason, it can start for no reason, too."

Apollo closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. He reached into his heart, and deeper than that, into the commanding light of the universe that guided him and his family in moments that made demands upon them.

Something . . . someone . . . who?

"Tell me more," Apollo said. "I need to know everything—consequences, prospects, options. We're still in subspace, right? Transitioning between our former coordinates and our destination? Can we get out without Tylium power?"

The engineer shook his head.

"Not a chance. We're going to have a hard time with life support in a few centons if I don't switch us over to battery reserve power we'd used to maintain orbit in drydock."

Starbuck chimed in. "Who cares if we can't breathe! If we can't move…"

Apollo had to smile, even in the crisis. Starbuck… who needed to breathe as long as you could fly?

Nilsen blinked. He was as scared as anyone else. "If we can't get the reactors working, well, we could die here," he said.

Lorrins, the physicist, didn't contradict him.

Something from that sense of the universe and time and space told Apollo that the engineer was right. They wouldn't be able to fix the Tylium reactors in this place. The fleet was falling apart. The civilian ships had already been pushed to the edge and beyond; most of them were nearly out of fuel.

He reached deeper into his intuition. There, that was the insight, the image of a countenance shrouded in a chiaroscuro of the soul. *Baltar*!

Was this Baltar's doing? Some evil scheme he'd put into play, a plot only now come to fruition?

No. This is no plot. It is Baltar who can lead us through this wilderness.

And that was the most amazing thing—not just the impossibility of the moment that had come upon them, not just the broken shape and nature of an unknown place in the universe that could puzzle a brilliant physicist like Lorrins. What was amazing was the whole notion that a blackguard like Baltar could lead them from this disaster.

"Get me options," Apollo said. He was starting for the door, his feet on the move, running again—half in a dream and half out—heading for a place he did not yet fully and consciously realize.

"Switch over to reserve power. Then get me an understanding of what's gone wrong, and what we can do about it."

It was an order issued more for the benefit of the crew than it was for Apollo himself. He already knew their circumstance in his heart: It was his family's gift to come to communion with the infinite. His father, Adama, possessed that gift, and his grandfather before him; it ran through generations of grandfathers back into the dawn of memory.

And now that gift, in this place beyond anything they'd ever known, was coming to full flower in Apollo.

In that moment, Apollo knew in his heart where they were and why they were there. There was no safe, easy way out of this situation. In their moment of victory, bought at such great cost, they had all been thrown into something much worse.

And in his heart, though he never could have voiced it, in his heart he knew with a foreboding that passes certainty that there was a revolution coming. He had the sense that people had been pushed beyond their endurance, and it wasn't a situation where speeches or pretty words would help. People would die. The thin shred of hope that they'd somehow made it safe beyond

the Cylon menace was all totally changed. And… Baltar! Baltar, the answer? How could it be?

"Come with me, Starbuck," he said. "We need to find Athena and pay a visit to an old… friend."

Starbuck looked quizzically up at Apollo. "Who?" he asked. "Apollo, do you really think now is the time for visiting?" Apollo's stern expression told him that he'd better follow, and there'd be time for questions and answers later.

They met Athena in the hall outside engineering. Apollo was still in his haze, moving at the direction of things unknowable, unthinkable, powerful, and strange. He saw her and he said, "Athena, come," and she looked at him like he was out of his mind. "Come with us to see Baltar," he said.

She said angry words he did not hear.

"We must get Lorrins, too," Apollo said. "This is a matter that he can help interpret."

Frowning, Athena fell in behind Starbuck, and after they retrieved a confused Lorrins, they went together to the brig.

"Baltar," Apollo told the sentries who stood watch outside the brig. "We've come for him."

That was not a command they would obey, of course. It could not be. Baltar was only too capable of creating an illusion in the mind of a jailer, and therefore there were deep hypnotic controls on all the brig sentries.

The sentries stood impassive, awaiting the codes that would trigger the posthypnotic suggestion to obey. Athena sighed impatiently, gave the high sign with her left fist, and said the seven secret words and syllables that would give them passage.

All the sentries stood down, and let them pass. Somewhere in the recesses of his mind, Apollo meant to thank her. But it was not clear to him whether

he said the words or not.

At the far end of the corridor was Baltar's cell; the force screen that sealed its doorway admitted Apollo, Starbuck, Athena and the physicist Lorrins automatically. Baltar was sitting in a chair that faced out his window, watching the *Ur* clouds and energy vortexes that surrounded them with a quiet fascination.

"Apollo, Starbuck, Athena," he said, "I've been expecting you."

Starbuck swore an oath under his breath. Athena pushed past Apollo in high dudgeon. "This is your doing, isn't it,, Baltar? Gods help you, you old fool, you're going to rue the sectare…"

Starbuck cut her off. "She's right, isn't she, Baltar? You're the one who's trapped us here, the engine, you—and it's you who's put Apollo into this fugue, isn't it?"

"I'm going to kill him, don't try to stop me."

And then Apollo spoke.

"Starbuck, no," he said. "Baltar isn't why we're here. He could be our way out."

Baltar grinned up at them. Something about his expression changed the very feeling in the room. They all sensed it. Apollo gasped, and shuddered, and fell out of his trance entirely.

"What?" he was breathless, trying not to fall to his knees. Something deep in his soul ached with dread, but much of the vision, much of what he'd *known* during the vision, had already begun to fade.

"Terrible things coming," he said aloud, trying to force the dream—memory of the vision to take root in his conscious mind.

Starbuck shook his head, confused to see Apollo's condition. He wondered if it was some kind of joke—maybe something Baltar was trying to pull. But Baltar was a prisoner and they were all there at Apollo's side. He

grinned as he helped Apollo to his feet. "Like hell," he said. "The old villain's playing mind tricks on you, Apollo. Don't let him rattle you. He knows the *Galactica* and the rest of the fleet are in trouble, and he's trying to make use of it."

Baltar straightened his shoulders, staring hard at Starbuck and Athena. There was fear in his old eyes, but only a little. "You're wrong," he said. "You could not be more wrong."

Apollo was breathing steadily now, almost fully recovered. Starbuck grabbed Baltar's collar, his other fist drawn back to strike.

Apollo jumped forward. "No, Starbuck," he said. "The two of you, listen. Baltar's right this time—that was a true seeing, maybe the most profound vision I've had in my life, in fact. And it is true: Baltar is the key to the pit we've fallen into—and it's a deeper pit can you can imagine. We've never been in this sort of trouble before, not even when we watched Kobol implode and faced the total destruction of the fleet. More than our mission, it's the very nature of the universe that's at stake. Without the Tylium reactors, we've got no hope of going on. We have had a terrible, terrible accident, and if we don't extract ourselves very carefully, reality as we know it may collapse. Chaos will follow."

Starbuck rolled his eyes. "What are you talking about, Apollo? You sound to me like a man who's had too much ale."

But Athena… Athena was staring at Apollo like maybe she had a sense of it, too—just the slightest sense. "What did you see?" she asked. "Where are we, Apollo?"

He nodded at Baltar. "Tell us, Baltar," he said. "Tell us what the hell is going on."

Baltar looked away uneasily.

"Your sister will want to accuse me of this," he said. "That may be fair. But it is not true. The possibility of this is a legend in Cylon lore—they bragged

about being able to travel beyond the universe that we understand. I have never heard of it as a reality, never."

Starbuck grabbed him by the collar again. "What did you do, you Muskvynian ferret?"

Baltar grasped Starbuck's hand and carefully, firmly pried his fingers from his collar. "We had to get away. I helped the *Galactica* implement Chitain-Cylon wormhole technology, you immature hothead," he said. "I can't pretend I know exactly how it worked, but in that last moment of the battle, I knew that Apollo would access those coordinates. And if you want my help dealing with this disaster you will kindly stop manhandling me."

Apollo had a hand on Starbuck's shoulder. "Enough, old friend," he said, calming Starbuck's rage, buying time for Baltar to speak.

For a moment the cell was eerily silent. Baltar finally broke the spell.

"You sound like your father, Apollo," Baltar said. "For a moment I thought I'd heard his voice when you were speaking."

Athena was seldom nervous, but she gave a nervous laugh.

"I heard it, too," she said. "Is it possible… ?"

Apollo smiled at his sister. "Of course it's possible," he said, "but that was me, not Father. I grow more like him as I age."

"You do, Apollo," said Baltar. "It's unsettling."

Apollo smiled. "I'm sure it must be. Now tell me, old friend, and old foe, what do you know? Why did my vision point me in your direction in this moment of need?"

Baltar frowned.

"When a ship passes through a jump point," he said, "it passes momentarily through some… other place. An *Ur* place, not of our universe. The physics are complicated, and in practical terms at the moment not of particular

consequence. From the point of view of the command and crew of a starship, one moment we are *here;* the next we are *there*.

"But strictly speaking, that's not the case. There is a mathematically complicated transition between *here* and *there;* adjustments in context that have to do with time and space and velocity."

At that moment, Lorrins interrupted. "Yes!" he cried. "I've heard of this. When we captured some of the Cylon databanks, I reviewed this. Baltar's right; it seemed like bragging to me. But they told about a place like this, an *Ur* universe that existed outside the normal confines of time and space. I couldn't tell if they truly knew that it existed, or were merely theorizing."

"It's real," Baltar said. "Look! See for yourself." he gestured at the window behind him. "This is what it *does* look like."

Starbuck groaned, shaking his head. Baltar ignored him. "The Cylons believed that every moment that ships and creatures from the universe that we know spent in this place threatened the universe without," Baltar said. "I don't pretend to understand the theory, but it was a place that upset even the order that their twisted minds could understand. They called this a place where patterns reflect on our world, a time under time where a ripple in the current of space flux can shape vast destinies in the material universe. Think of it as undertime, the one ultimately causal place in a causal universe."

"That's ridiculous," Starbuck said.

Dr. Lorrins, excited again, interrupted. "Starbuck, listen," he said, "Imagine for a moment that you went back in time and murdered your mother. Would you suddenly cease to exist? No; the universe doesn't keep tabs. You would exist in a loop of time, and forward from that loop. That's causality. It's the reason space and time are always in flux. Ultimately, we live in a universe where causes do and do not obtain. Some things we see simply are as they are, and the things that brought them into being may never have happened."

"I don't get it," Starbuck said. "There are always reasons that things happen."

"Oh, there usually are, I'll grant you that," Baltar said, leaning forward and running his hand through his still-dark hair. "But always? I think not. Have you ever used a starship to travel back into the ultimate moment of creation? Have you seen the ranks of thousands who've traveled there to bear witness? To see the unseen hand? I have gone a dozen times, Starbuck. I can tell you that there was no hand to see; for all that I can observe there may've been no Maker, for the big bang appeared to set itself into motion, entirely. But I can also tell you that that moment was deliberate, and carefully considered. The slightest changes in any aspect of it in the least way would have made a universe where no life was possible, where breath would not avail and the chemicals that let us live could not react with one another. The Maker made our universe with love, and consideration for our lives—he made the world to save us all, and ensure our posterity.

"But I have gone to watch him, and I have seen no hand of God, my friends," Baltar said, his face lined with exhaustion and eyes dark and knowing.

"You lie, old man," Starbuck growled. But even Starbuck could hear in his own voice how wrong he was. Even Dr. Lorrins had stood back, no longer excited to talk about the physics, and watched Baltar in wonder and fear.

Apollo's hand found Athena's.

"This place… this place is the tabulation underneath the unaccountable, uncountable universe," Baltar said. "If it were safe and I could travel here maliciously and with forethought, how I would love to watch creation from this vantage! But it must not be. This is where the flotsam and jetsam of the universe truly exist; if you cease to exist here, you do cease. It is like a living metaphor, in its way: in the universe without you could murder your grandmother and survive, but if someone killed your shadow here, you truly and spontaneously would cease to exist.

"This is a perilous place. We must leave as quickly as we are able."

"I could have told you that," said Athena.

Apollo held up a hand to silence his sister. "How did we get here?" he asked. "How do we get out?"

Lorrins chimed in once more. "The most likely thing to cause this is a bad transition through subspace—probably by dragging along too much dead mass from the warring Chitain and Cylon fleets as we made the transition. But it could just as well have been that we made the transition through an anomaly in space, or too close to the surface of a planet. Who knows how you bring about a circumstance that's never before been recorded?"

"What does it mean?"

"Instead of passing through a wormhole in a timeless moment we could not even see, we're trapped in a… a… think of it as a null-space—a tiny place inside space and time, and outside them, too. A place where many of the rules of physics that govern the universe simply don't apply," Lorrins said. "Baltar here has a sense of it. I can't pretend to understand why we've gotten into this predicament. Although he…" and Lorrins paused, his eyes wide. "He may not be able to understand or tell you the exact math, but I see that he understands the dangers far better than I do."

"The Tylium reactors," said Athena, "that's what's wrong with them. They *can't* work here."

"Yes," said Lorrins, as Baltar looked on, his dark brows lowered over his thoughtful eyes. "We have left the place where the physics that allows the Tylium reactors to run the fleet's vast resources of life support applies. And the fleet literally depends on these not just for interstellar power, but for sustenance."

Starbuck brought a hand to his forehead. "Tylium runs the matter transmutation systems."

Baltar nodded. "There is a mind in there beneath the hive of raging hormones, isn't there, Starbuck?"

Starbuck eyed him coldly.

Baltar continued. "You do understand. It is only the vast energy resources of the Tylium reactors that allow the fleet's effluvia to become clean food, water, air, and consumer products. Without Tylium reactors it's an open question whether we will first die of starvation or of strangling on our own waste."

Starbuck threw up his hands. "You ever had to take those emergency rations? They aren't like food. You don't eat them. I'd rather eat dirt, honestly. People take these for a couple yahrens in escape pods, and their stomachs can atrophy. At least if you were eating dirt, your stomach would get full."

"Bitter pills indeed," Baltar said. "But that's not the real problem, is it?"

"No," Apollo said. He looked at Athena, whose eyes went wide. "We are in Hades, and I do not yet know the way out of it. The only choices we have are bad ones."

Baltar studied Apollo carefully a moment. "Your father's son indeed, young Apollo."

"How do we get out of here?" Apollo asked.

Baltar looked really worried.

"We don't," he said.

That was all any of them could get out of Baltar. He faced the wall, crossed his arms, hung his head, and lapsed into silence.

"He's lying, Apollo," Athena said as they left the brig. "I know it in my bones."

Apollo nodded. "I know he was lying," he said. "But I also know it wasn't because he was trying to hurt us. He knows that if we die, he dies, too."

Starbuck rolled his eyes. "Apollo, you need… something. Another drink! Baltar never had a sectare when he didn't wake up evil."

Apollo laughed. "Maybe so, Starbuck. But nothing's normal here in this place. I'm sensing a lot of things from Baltar. There's… he's ashamed."

"You're out of your mind, Apollo," said Starbuck.

Athena pointed at Starbuck, waggling her finger. "No, he's right, Starbuck. Baltar *is* ashamed."

"Impossible!"

"I know. But I saw it in him, just as Apollo did."

"We really are trapped somewhere where the rules don't apply, aren't we?" Starbuck said as they continued down the corridor.

"Yeah," Apollo said.

There was this much Baltar will not admit to: He knew this possibility was waiting when he taught the fleet the Cylon-derived technology it used to move distances that can be as great as the intergalactic void. He was no engineer, nor even a theoretical scientist, but he was an apt student of the physical sciences, and in his long life he'd been exposed to disciplines of physics that no one else aboard the *Galactica* had ever imagined.

Their current circumstance was a remote possibility in a chapter of theoretical physics that the Cylons had bragged about, as if they could control the universe or travel beyond time and space. But the odds that anything would ever come of it were slim to none, and he knew damned well that men like Starbuck and Apollo had no patience for his interest in the remotest possibilities.

It is so rare that anything unlikely ever comes to happen; it is unlikely, after all.

And yet it seemed to Baltar that if he admitted to having foreseen the possibility, he'd be blamed for it—unfairly, perhaps.

He was almost certainly right about that.

And so he did not tell Apollo everything he knew, because it would seem to incriminate him. And at the end of Baltar's life, the last thing he wanted was more accusations and guilt—there was enough of that for the crimes he really had committed.

The things he didn't tell were very important. First, the mass necessary to throw them all into this cloud beyond space and time was vast indeed, perhaps as vast as the mass of the combined Cylon and Chitain fleets; perhaps, indeed, the mass of a small planetoid, and the energy released by its annihilation. It was almost certainly true that they are not alone in this place—any survivors of the interplanetary cataclysm that destroyed the Cylon and Chitain armadas were in here with them. And Baltar knew Cylon bragging for what it was. No matter what they thought, they couldn't control the situation any more than *Galactica* could. Iblis hadn't caused this. That final cataclysm proved there was some hand there greater than Iblis' hand. Something beyond Baltar's sight, of that he was certain.

The other thing he could not say was that the peculiar properties of this place allowed Iblis to employ his ansibles to observe everything that happened here, and in intimate detail. They were being spied upon, even if the spy couldn't get to them.

Part of Baltar really wanted to tell Apollo, but he was there with Athena, and Starbuck. Neither of them could be trusted; Starbuck would throttle Baltar in an eyeblink.

Baltar was free. That should have been told. Was there any escape from Iblis' grasp? Yes. But they didn't know. And even Apollo wouldn't believe him if he told. That would have been a particularly obvious Iblis trick, pretending that Baltar was free of his influence, making Baltar seem like everyone's newfound friend.

Saying nothing was the only way that Baltar saw that he could keep his freedom. This *Ur* cloud—beyond time and space—was 99% a deathtrap, but it also decreased Iblis' capacity for mind thrall. At the same time, it was enhancing Apollo's communion with the infinite and his knowledge of

things to come. This was a strange place, wonderful and terrible, a place where the best and worst angels of nature came as naturally as a flower.

So, even though a lot of Baltar wanted to be forthcoming with Apollo—even with Athena and Starbuck—Baltar was still the man he'd always been.

There was a moral weakness in him, true. He was a self-centered egomaniacal traitor and a coward, but he was also born to greatness as the best of us; and here in the *Ur* place the best angels of his nature felt an overwhelming need to make their peace with his own kind before his end. And here, now, in this place the Maker never meant for anyone to be, his weaknesses were entirely his own.

Baltar's real problem was that he was responsible for himself in a way he hadn't been for yahrens. Couldn't blame Iblis. Couldn't blame…

He didn't want to remember, but he did all the same. The same situation, only now Baltar's people were at the end.

This was the end. This wasn't the original Cylon fleet. They were stuck in a deathtrap, facing total destruction. Brother was going to kill brother. Father and son would be torn apart; husband and wife, perhaps. Baltar saw days ahead that even his destructive imagination couldn't picture, felt them in his bones. Then felt rage, seeping into him, bleeding into his mind. This time, he swore to himself, it would not be Baltar's decision that led to the destruction of humanity, or all that remained of it.

He was not a great man, nor even a good one; he was not a decent man, but there was within him the possibility of decency, and even more, here in hell at the end of his sectares, he wanted… something for himself. Didn't want to be alone.

Wasn't that the lot of most people? Only the smallest portion were people of character; rather most people were good and bad mixed together.

Baltar was a bad man, in the end. But judge him as carefully as you would be judged—his lot is more our own than we would prefer to admit. He knew if he spoke up too soon, he would not be believed, and he would seal

his own fate. The only chance lay in stealth, and in waiting and hoping that Apollo would figure things out on his own.

That was Baltar's plan, and nobody but Baltar could ever have understood it.

As they reached the bridge, Apollo saw that they'd come nowhere, that the problems that confronted them were still as they'd been when he'd left, and that it was time to bring command to the sort of consensus that would allow for action.

"Starbuck," he said. "I want a meeting: conference room eight, twenty centons. Key players from engineering, science, and command. If we can't know what to do, we're going to have to guess. But I want the best minds we have doing the guessing. Make it happen."

"Yes sir!"

Starbuck was as uncomfortable as he had ever been in all his yahrens.

Very uncomfortable.

Very, VERY uncomfortable.

What got to him wasn't just being stuck on the underside of the universe like spilled mushies stuck to the sole of the Maker's shoe. It wasn't just Apollo acting so much like his father, Adama, that he seemed like a trance channeler in the bazaar on Galfrax Nine. It wasn't Athena on the verge of hysteria—calm, resolute Athena, hysterical! It wasn't just the engineers and scientists, all of them droning on cluelessly for a meeting that stretched on the ninety centons, somehow managing (with their unwillingness to admit that they knew nothing and their need to posture) to turn a circumstance that almost certainly meant the end of the fleet into an occasion for boredom.

All of that—well, Starbuck wasn't born yestersectare.

He knew the fleet, its people, and its crew; he'd looked at death before, and lost many whom he'd loved. None of that was new.

No. What really unsettled Starbuck was Baltar.

Baltar!

Starbuck had known Baltar almost as long as he'd known Apollo, and in all that time he'd never sensed any decency in him. Oh, Starbuck wasn't any Adama, or even Athena or Apollo; he didn't see into people by communing with the infinite. But he had good people sense, and he knew what was in that blackguard's heart.

Baltar was an Alturian slime vermin, the kind that infests the produce on Alturia Four. Starbuck still hated thinking about getting those damned slime worms out of the ventilation system after the *Galactica* had picked up a case… the things eat dust, quite efficiently, and leave in its place a stinking slime that never dries___

Starbuck shuddered, remembering. All that slick gooey stinking slime!

That was Baltar—a slime that never dries.

And the most unsettling thing Starbuck could imagine was seeing a glimmer of decency in that man. It was unnatural. That alone made Starbuck think that something worse was on the way, a whole lot worse.

"Starbuck! Starbuck, are you dozing with your eyes open?"

Starbuck felt himself blush. "Sorry, Apollo. I guess I was. Did I miss something important?" He looked around the room, fighting the impulse to make a sarcastic comment. And failing. "I'm lost in the doubletalk and butt-covering. Sorry."

A titter of giggles went around the room. Athena cleared her throat.

"Cute, Starbuck," she said angrily. And then she looked around the room. "But he's not wrong. There's nobody in this room who has a clue where or why we are, or how we've ended up here."

Apollo nodded. "He is," he said. "Starbuck, I need you to get Baltar up here. He, at least, had some understanding of this place." And Baltar had a sense

of the choices Apollo was going to have to make, also.

It wasn't a whole lot different from the choice Baltar had made all those yahrens before that had sent the ragtag fleet on its long journey. Baltar had sold out all the tribes save his own; the Cylons had hardly kept their bargain.

It was only Starbuck's loyalty to Apollo that sent him on his journey to the brig. Anybody else, he thought. Anybody else, but Apollo…

"Baltar," he said, accessing the old monster's cell. "They want you up in the command council meeting."

Baltar was waiting for him, ready. "Yes," the old man said. "I've been expecting you."

Starbuck rolled his eyes; inwardly, imperceptibly, he shuddered.

"Good. They're stumped up there."

"I'm sure they are," Baltar said, grinning at Starbuck.

"I'm going to shackle you," Starbuck snarled.

Baltar nodded. "I understand."

Shaking his head, searching Baltar's face for some answer to the mystery, Starbuck snapped the cuffs on the old villain's wrists. The old criminal thanked him and smiled; that was the worst part of all of it—Baltar, polite!

Baltar entered the conference room like a conquering hero, a conquering hero in cuffs. He carried himself with the regal air of one who commands and all who saw him sensed that something had changed in him, although only Apollo reacted with anything but disgust. There was something *wise* about the old snake. Unmistakably wise.

Everyone turned. Baltar chose to take their astonished looks as admiration.

Maybe that was even a smile on Athena's face! "Baltar," she said. Baltar took that as a friendly greeting, but he did not smile at her. "You clearly

knew a lot about what has happened. Tell us what we can do."

Now they needed him. Now! After all those years.

Baltar couldn't help himself. He laughed ominously and watched all of their expressions change. Tigh, Athena, Starbuck, even Apollo. "You want to try blasting your way out, Athena? It might work, you know—an atomic demolition munition in the right place, and this capsule of null-space could become a wormhole again."

"Well, frack! Let's do it!" Starbuck cried, reaching for his comm, starting to issue orders to the weapons control officer on the bridge.

"No!" Baltar cried. He rushed forward. So much for the regal entrance. "Starbuck, you idiot!"

"What?" Starbuck said, dropping his hand.

Apollo stood and went to Starbuck's side, shaking his head.

"Don't you know when a man's trying to be ironic?" Baltar asked, looking at all of the puzzled, alarmed, confused faces. "If this battlestar tries to blast its way out, we could destroy whole quadrants of space with an atom blast in here, even, conceivably, alter the physics of our universe."

Starbuck swore. His face went pale. "You'd better not be trying to…" he growled.

Apollo touched Starbuck's shoulder, shaking his head.

"I understand," he told Baltar. He looked around at the others. Athena, Tigh, and all the rest. They were trying to understand. The danger was clear, but Apollo realized that even Athena didn't realize… everything. Athena had to get back to the *Daedalus*. But even with the two battlestars…

"I'm going to say something that doesn't leave this room," Apollo said.

"Of course," everyone said. Everyone except Baltar.

"That includes you," Apollo said to Baltar. Baltar nodded.

"You can't trust him," Starbuck cried.

"We don't have any choice," Apollo said in a low voice. To Baltar, he said, "Maybe you already know. We don't have the power to blast out of here no matter what. Our resources were critical before this happened."

Starbuck thought for a moment that Athena was going to challenge Apollo, because she stood and leaned on the table. She was some woman!

"Apollo's right," Athena said in her strong, clear voice. "Baltar, we don't have many options. What can we do?" She swayed the others a little; she and Apollo were a team, and even Starbuck began to question his assumptions about Baltar. Good, bad? What *was* he?

"Send out small teams in Vipers, have them explore the cloud forms that surround us. If they can find a way out hidden in there, we could use this as a wormhole after all."

"Fuel's at critical," Tigh said. "We've got…"

Apollo nodded at the president, still his best command officer in addition to Athena.

"Our resources are very limited for… exploration… What else can we do?"

"Pray," Baltar said.

"Oh, frack!" Starbuck said, unable to keep quiet any longer. "You can count yourself out on that, Baltar."

Apollo didn't even smile. "What else, Baltar? What other alternatives?"

"Accept our fate," Baltar said, "and die with honor."

Starbuck jumped toward Baltar, but Apollo held him back; the tension in the room was like lightning sparking in a summer storm.

"What do you know about that?" Starbuck cried.

"Starbuck," Apollo kept saying. Baltar grinned and drew his cloak close. When he caught Athena's eye, he winked.

Starbuck and Sheba organized the Vipers. The long-range patrol prepared to set out. Starbuck didn't bother Apollo with the details. There was a problem with the fuel right off; Apollo just said, "take what you need." Starbuck assumed there'd be more… somewhere. So he "borrowed" enough for Troy, Dalton and Trays to penetrate deep into the *Ur* cloud. It wasn't hard to do that if he promised the civilian ships that it would be paid back.

And of course they would be paid back. Troy, Dalton and Trays would find the way out. If they had problems, Boomer and Bojay were right along with them.

Sheba approved; in fact, she got even more fuel from one of the agri-ships.

It wasn't as easy as it seemed. Ever since they'd landed in this cloud and the Tylium reactors went dark, the bad situation they'd had at the battle of Kobol had gotten a lot worse. The Vipers had to use their slow, conventional engines—engines they'd ordinarily use for fine docking adjustments in close quarters. And once those fuel cells were gone, they were gone.

Even so, Starbuck didn't see a problem with "borrowing" and offering to pay back later.

Troy found out about it as they were launching. "Starbuck," he said, "Why did you promise the *Ceres* and the *Astrogator* that you'd pay them back? We don't know…"

"You're going to find the way out, buddy," Starbuck said. "Once we blow this cloud, we'll find a decent planet and rebuild. The reactors will be back online, and it'll all be okay."

Dalton came running up behind Troy. As soon as she saw Starbuck and Troy talking, she stopped. Her whole expression changed.

"Hey," she said to Starbuck.

"Hey," he said back.

Troy looked between the two of them. Nothing was ever easy between Starbuck and Dalton. Troy knew a lot of Dalton's complicated feelings toward her father. Somehow, the nagging question about the borrowed fuel didn't seem so important right then.

"Listen," Starbuck said, hesitating and shifting around awkwardly from one foot to the other. "Dalton, take care of yourself out there."

"Yeah," she said. And with a brief smile, she leaned close and kissed Starbuck's cheek. "Don't worry," she whispered. "I'll take care of Troy, too."

Troy didn't hear what she said. Who knows what he would have said to that? He punched Starbuck's arm and said, "I'll take care of her."

"Yeah," Starbuck said. Then he started to retreat. It was obvious that he didn't know what to say. They were going out into totally unknown territory. The regular fuel cells seemed to work fine, even if the Vipers were slow—right near *Galactica* and *Daedalus*. That might not hold the farther out the patrols went.

"Starbuck," Troy called. "What if we don't find anything out there? You just took the total reserves for those two ships. By the time Sheba's finished, they can't…"

"Don't worry!" Starbuck said. "It's Apollo's orders. He knows what he's doing."

"Okay," Troy said. Then Trays came running up and Troy definitely didn't want to get into any small talk with him around. Not any more than he had to. He turned to say something to Dalton, but Trays had grabbed Dalton's hand and was dragging her toward their Vipers, pointing at something.

Troy felt his eyes narrowing and his heart start pounding.

Not now, he told himself. *Don't get into anything with him*. The fleet was counting on them. But Trays! That tracking immature, aggravating… he

was already out of sight behind the fuselage of the Viper with Dalton. That couldn't last, not with Troy there. He ran after them.

Athena returned to the *Daedalus*, organizing more patrols there.

That left Apollo heading for the bridge. On the way, he saw Tigh, heading the other way toward the Council chambers.

"Hey," Apollo said, smiling, but feeling like he wanted to… well, maybe do something like Starbuck always did, to blow off steam—game of triad, Pyramid—there weren't any centons for that.

Tigh's forehead was lined; it was obvious he had a lot on his mind, and the telltale deep lines on each side of his mouth were tight with worry.

Things had been getting bad all over the *Galactica*, because people were scared. Really scared. But the corridor was the same pristine, calm, orderly place it had always been. Apollo's heart and mind were anything but calm. The fleet's status was… critical in every way. There wasn't enough fuel, no matter what Apollo did, and the food stores were… Apollo suddenly reached over and put his hand on Tigh's shoulder.

"It will work," Tigh said. "Let me handle the Council."

Apollo tried to nod, but he couldn't. All at once he turned away. He missed Athena already, and she'd only been back on the *Daedalus* a few centons.

It was like Athena had said. They had no choice. The Vipers had to have the fuel. The pilots and the warriors had to have enough rations. And…

Tigh and Apollo both knew. There was no point in hashing it over again. There were only so many food rations left, and only so much fuel.

"Why did we get those coordinates! Why did Athena hear that?" Apollo asked in a low, desperate voice.

"It will work, Apollo," Tigh said, his military calm keeping his expression steady and his voice from rising into desperation.

"I told Starbuck to take what was needed," Apollo said. "Do…"

"There's no choice," Tigh said. "Not any. It's not like I believe Baltar, but I can see for myself. There's no planet here that our scanners can find. Dead astrolons, that's about it. If we don't send out those patrols, we're all…"

"I know," Apollo interrupted. He shook Tigh's hand. "Explain this to the Council. They won't understand unless you explain everything."

"I will," Tigh said in his deep voice. "The Vipers will find a way out. Then, this crisis will pass," he said.

That was nothing like Apollo's vision, but he couldn't tell Tigh. He couldn't send him off to the council like that. Even though Apollo still felt the warmth of his deep connection with Athena, he had never felt so alone. He watched Tigh's cloak swirling as the president left on his errand, and turned back to the bridge.

There were a lot of questions for Apollo. How shall we feed our people? What shall we do when our fuel reserves run out?

"Wait" was not the right answer, but it was the only one that Apollo had. That, and whatever Baltar knew that he wasn't telling.

If anybody had told Apollo that he'd be seriously considering relying on Baltar for *anything* a few centons before, he would have laughed out loud. But now…

On the bridge of the *Daedalus*, Athena had her own problems.

"Athena," Flight Officer Omega said. It was good that Athena had his experience available on the *Daedalus*. "We've got more trouble."

Athena couldn't believe that there was even more "trouble." Things had gone so crazy, but she knew that Omega wouldn't overstate a thing.

"The *Hestia* is breaking up; they're breached in three spots," he said.

The *Hestia* was not the largest of the civilian ships, but there were more than two hundred men, women and children on her.

. "Can we launch a—" Athena hoped that they could send over a repair team, perhaps fix *Hestia* quickly.

Omega shook his head. "No, we're completely overextended. The best we can do is send a transport, evacuate them—there's room on the *Rising Star*."

"How long do we have?" Athena asked. Then her heart went cold. She knew people on the *Hestia*. Protea, and her children. Protea had grown up with Athena. She hadn't talked recently to her, but she was positive that was Protea's ship. There were more children than adults on the ship. This was unbelievable!

"Unknown," Omega said. "It's the fuel diversion, too. They might have been able to do more repairs if…" He left the rest of the sentence unsaid.

"Get a rescue ship over to them," Athena ordered. Omega nodded and executed the command.

"This is the *Hestia*!" came a desperate female voice over the comm. "We've got to…"

"*Hestia*," Athena said, breaking in, "we're sending a rescue barge. You've got to evacuate as soon as possible. We have no resources to repair you; we're going to salvage the ship and get you to the *Rising Star*."

"But this is our home!" the woman cried. It wasn't Protea.

Athena knew. She said things of comfort, but the words sounded so empty. There were two hundred desperate lives on that ship, and two hundred people who did not want to leave the only home they'd known for twenty years. Protea was a talented teacher; the last time Athena had seen her, silver was threading through her long, dark hair. But her face had still looked young, and she had been happy about the education program on the *Hestia;* even cheerful despite their cramped quarters.

Another ship lost; the fleet was collapsing upon itself like Kobol had under Iblis' demonic onslaught.

"Salvage! We don't want to lose our…"

"*Hestia*, we can't repair you. Prepare your people for evacuation," Athena said, cutting *Hestia's* transmission off mid-sentence.

Omega looked over at Athena, his eyes wide. But he didn't say anything.

"We don't have any choice," Athena said. "This is the only option."

Omega nodded; he was sending out the barge that none of those people were going to want to board. The *Rising Star* was overcrowded as it was. Nobody would be happy to welcome another two hundred homeless refugees.

"It's getting to the point where we can't juggle all of this," Omega said, clearing his throat. He wouldn't meet Athena's eyes. "My brother is, uh…"

"Your brother?" Athena asked.

"He's already on the *Rising Star*. He had the light cruiser, remember? Just four families. They had zero fuel left after we jumped into this… place," Omega said. "They were counting on the Tylium to regenerate. I didn't want to ask. He asked me, and I didn't want to ask."

Athena looked into Omega's eyes. She saw the worry there, and the shame. He couldn't even help his own family.

"You could have had them come here," Athena said.

Omega shook his head. "No," he said. "We're stacking bodies as it is. And how would that look if an officer of the bridge gave that type of special treatment to…"

"This might not be the worst we have to face," Athena told him.

Omega's eyes went wide, but he didn't say anything for a long moment.

"The barge is on its way," he said. "They'll get those people off the *Hestia* in time."

All Athena could do was nod.

"I've got to think about this," she said, and headed for her quarters.

"Lords of Kobol," Omega said under his breath. "If it could get worse, I don't know what that would be." He hadn't been entirely truthful with Athena; he had sent some extra food rations to his brother. The food wasn't as bad as the fuel. Nobody would notice *that*. And no, he hadn't shown favoritism. But what man could see his own family starve when he could do something about it?

Athena started to contact Apollo; she had a terrible sense that he was going through almost the same thing that she was going through—this incredible fear and worry. Then she thought for a moment about Starbuck. No, not that. Now wasn't the time for thinking about Starbuck. There'd be time later.

But as soon as she sat at her private console, it warned her that someone had been trying to get hold of her on her private channel.

Ten attempts!

Athena opened the channel; it was the *Hestia*. Protea!

"Protea," she said. "I'm so…"

"Athena, thank the Lords," Protea said. At least, the voice sounded like Athena's old friend. But her face, her face!

The hair that Athena remembered as being dark, threaded with silver, was now dull, steel gray. Protea looked like she could be her own grandmother.

"Oh, Protea," Athena said. Her heart jumped. She reached for the comm and began to call Omega. She'd get Protea over to the *Daedalus*.

"We're starving, Athena," Protea said. "I know that if I tell you directly, you'll help. We've been trying to get messages through for centons, but we get passed around. We can't…"

"Food is very short," Athena told her. "Protea, let me…" Again, Athena reached to call Omega, but Protea interrupted.

"We've been friends many yahrens," Protea said. Then, she smiled, and for a moment, the old Protea, the laughing, quick, lithe girl that Athena remembered always in her heart, came back.

"Yes," Athena said. "Protea, let me help you!"

Protea looked over her shoulder. "They're coming," she said. She must have meant the warriors, to evacuate everyone on Protea's ship.

"Please, you can come here to the *Daedalus*. We'll find room for you."

"If it was just me, I'd consider that," Protea said. "I'm…" and she paused, sighing. "I'm tired. But it's not just me, Athena. I have my daughter, yes, but there are thirty others."

"Your group of children," Athena said. The program Protea had fought so hard to get going.

"I can't go anywhere without them," she said. "We'll evacuate. Perhaps there will be more food on the *Rising Star*."

Athena nodded. "Yes," she said. "Apollo has ordered that it be stocked with sufficient rations."

"Thank the Lords," Protea said. "Perhaps…" Again, she looked anxiously over her shoulder.

"Yes?" Athena asked.

"I must go," Protea said. "Athena, I've got to tell you. It's not just that we've been suffering. Some people don't want to…" but she stopped, and a look of total desperation came over her careworn face.

"Some people don't want to what?" Athena asked.

She heard commotion behind Protea.

"I've got to go. Be well, Athena. I'll probably never see you again."

"Protea!" Athena cried.

But the screen went dark.

# # #

"Tigh, you're amazing!" Apollo cried. Somehow, Tigh had worked out a plan for both food and fuel rationing. For the time being, it seemed as though things were stabilizing.

"Thank you," Tigh said. Apollo grinned at him, and reached out to take his hand. But both of them turned to face the comm when a red light flashed.

It was Sheba.

"Apollo," Sheba said in her no-nonsense way. "You need to know right now. We've lost contact with the Viper patrols."

"Boomer and Bojay?" Apollo asked.

"Boomer, Bojay, Dalton, Trays and Troy," Sheba said. "We've launched the other patrols in a search pattern, but so far, there's nothing."

"Launch second patrols," Apollo said. Tigh immediately went to his station, glancing only briefly at Apollo in alarm. Apollo turned his attention back to Sheba. "How? When?"

"Not long ago. It's this cloud," Sheba said. "It's like flying through soup."

"Lords of Kobol," Apollo whispered. He thought of Baltar down in the brig. Baltar probably knew that this would happen. This had to be one of the little tidbits that Apollo sensed the old villain was keeping to himself.

"We've got to be careful, Apollo," Sheba said.

Apollo thought about that a moment. It was hardly a typical comment for Sheba to make. "I know," he said.

"We can only take the Vipers so far. The cloud interferes with communications, and it's not reliable. There's no way to tell."

"Apollo," Tigh said, looking over at him, "That plan."

"Yes?" Apollo said, turning back toward the straight-backed president, who was still at his most useful on the bridge no matter how hard he worked with the Council.

"One launch of an extra patrol of Vipers and there goes our fuel reserves."

"Lords," Apollo said under his breath, considering an oath, but the whole situation was beyond an oath at this point.

"I know," Apollo said so that Tigh could hear him. "But we haven't got any choice. Launch the extra patrols. If we don't find those five long-range Vipers, we'll never find…"

"Understood," Tigh said. In one micron, Tigh reallocated the fuel reserves of six civilian ships; in a few centons, their air scrubbers would stop working. And even the carefully rationed food pellets wouldn't be able to get to them. There wouldn't be enough fuel for that.

Wordlessly, Tigh nodded at Apollo.

Apollo prayed silently, but it felt so empty. And then a wave of pain came over him. Athena! She was calling, from inside.

"I have to go," he told Tigh. Somehow he knew that it wouldn't be good news from the *Daedalus*, either.

Starbuck had been harboring hopes of a triad game, but that was kind of like wishing he'd wake up and find out that he was King of the Universe. There wasn't too much fun going on anywhere, and Athena was even back on the *Daedalus*. Starbuck wasn't quite sure why that bothered him; he should be more bothered about Dalton out there on that patrol.

Frack! This cloud was a disaster. He knew that Dalton was okay. It hadn't been that long since they were out of contact. And Starbuck had flown in that cloud enough himself to know how crazy it was out there. It wouldn't be the first time Vipers had lost contact, only to come back perfectly fine.

He was telling himself these things, kind of doing a little pep talk to cheer himself up on the way to the Viper bay when he saw a bunch of skinny,

dirty teenaged girls running in a pack straight toward him.

"Hey, easy!" he said. But they ignored him, rushing past.

Shaking his head, Starbuck went on farther. Then he saw the reason they were running. And figured out why they were whooping and hollering.

An old lady was slumped in the corridor. Blood stained her wild white hair and ran down her face.

"Oh, frack!" Starbuck said, kneeling beside her.

"Help me," the old lady said. Starbuck put his arm around her. He struggled to understand. How? Why?

"Girls!" he called after the fleeing crowd. "Stop!" The old lady really needed help. Torn for a moment, unable to decide, he lost valuable microns. By the time he stood and got out his laser pistol, looking at it with wide eyes—the whole idea of discharging it after a bunch of teenage criminals on the *Galactica* was totally insane—the girls had disappeared, giggling and bloody-handed, before he could reach them.

"Thank you," the old lady said, and she started to cry.

"Oh, frack," Starbuck said, feeling as out of place and helpless as he would have felt if she had been a baby. How was he supposed to help her? Carry her to sickbay—that was it?

She didn't weigh much; Starbuck was glad about that.

"You're a hero," she said.

Normally, Starbuck blossomed with any type of praise, but he felt horrible. He hadn't realized anything was wrong; it wasn't like you saw teenaged girls running around acting crazy on the *Galactica*, but then, Starbuck had seen and heard a lot of weird things since the fleet had been thrown into this disaster.

Now they were at the door to sickbay, but Cassiopeia was nowhere to be seen.

Dr. Salik's clerk didn't act much like Starbuck was a hero. Things were just too…

Starbuck suddenly took in the whole scene. You're about as smart as a daggit, he said to himself. Starbuck, what type of fantasy world were you living in while all this was going on? Not like you didn't get really familiar with the whole sickbay routine, but…

It crossed Starbuck's mind that maybe the old lady would have been better off back in the corridor.

"Ma'am, we'll get you some help," he told her, but he felt like a liar. The clerk was still glaring furiously at him. The uproar was deafening. Sick and injured people huddled on the floor, every bed was filled, and Starbuck spotted one medtech who he'd always thought was good-looking hunched over a crying child, stroking her hair and saying, "I know your head hurts. We'll get you some more medicine soon."

The medtech turned, noticing Starbuck, meeting his eyes. Starbuck realized from her expression that there wasn't more medicine for the crying kid. Where was Cassiopeia? Doctor Salik? The medtech wasn't good-looking at all right then. Her hair hung limply and her tunic was stained with blood and other fluids Starbuck didn't want to know about. She said nothing.

"Another one?" the clerk asked in a cold tone. "By Kobol, not another."

"Some girls," Starbuck said. "They attacked her and robbed her. I tried to __"

"There's no more room in the brig than there is here," the clerk snapped.

"I guess not," Starbuck said, smiling. This time, his smile didn't work at all. But the medtech who used to be a nice-looking woman wasn't dead at heart. Soon, she was at the old lady's side, and even found a place for her, far in the back where Starbuck carried the old lady and laid her down.

Starbuck stayed, and did what he could to help. With no training and no medicine and no more beds, there wasn't much he could do. Wasn't much any of them could do.

"Baltar understands," Apollo told Athena. "I don't know why, but he's got the answers that we need."

"He's evil," Athena said, simply.

"I'm going to let him out of the brig," Apollo told her.

Then, Athena told Apollo about the *Hestia* and her friend Protea.

"She was about to tell me something, Apollo. They were starving, she said. But there was more to it."

"Tigh and I worked it out," Apollo told Athena. "You've got things squared away on the *Daedalus*. We've rationed everything down to the last ounce of fuel, and the last…"

"I know," Athena said. "But we're at bare minimum. Everybody is. Apollo, I'm not sure what she was trying to say. It was almost like she thought she was going to her death!"

"Everyone's under stress," Apollo said. "We've had to…" He told Athena of Tigh's orders; how the search for the lost patrol had destroyed the delicate balance of food and fuel.

"No matter how bad it gets, I can't believe that Baltar's the answer, Apollo," Athena said. "He's evil through and through."

"Not any more," Apollo said. Athena's eyes went completely wide.

"Apollo, I trust you," she said. "It's Baltar that I can never trust."

The leadership of the *Galactica* and the fleet was a responsibility Apollo had aspired to all his life; a responsibility that Baltar had wanted so desperately and bitterly that the overwhelming need for it had driven him to evil; a responsibility that Athena was fit for, and one she would have taken in an instant if ever it had fallen to her.

"I'm going to release him under my supervision,""Apollo said.

"Don't do it, Apollo," Athena told him. "Baltar will only make things worse."

"My heart is telling me this is right," Apollo said. "Baltar knows something. He'll never tell sitting there in the brig."

At that moment, Starbuck burst in. He'd heard quite a bit.

"Do what?" Starbuck asked, eyes blazing. "Maybe he'll rob an old lady, too." Starbuck was still burning from the incident with the old woman.

"Apollo, how could Baltar help?" Athena said. "He's always torn people apart, never brought them together."

"Listen to your sister," Starbuck said.

Apollo stood, turning away from the screen with Athena's face, and from Starbuck. He thought, long and hard. He was going to have to make more choices, choices none of them would like.

"I'll put a tracking and security shackle on his ankle," Apollo told Athena, turning back.

"Oh, so then you can be his nursemaid while he goes around sabotaging the *Galactica!"* Starbuck cried.

Athena felt Apollo's mind at that moment. The understanding that had grown so deep between them flickered. Athena had never thought, not for a micron, that Baltar could be trusted, but she saw into Apollo's heart at that moment. She could never trust Baltar, but she knew Apollo's every fiber, and some of the vision that he had—that he couldn't explain, but knew in his heart—came into her heart.

Starbuck continued complaining, but Athena said, "Starbuck!" in a loud, firm voice. One glance at her expression, and Starbuck fell silent.

"Hey," he said, shrugging. "I don't get it, but you two are in charge."

"I'm going to see Baltar," Apollo announced. Athena nodded. After Apollo left, she kept the connection open. She missed Starbuck. It was so hard,

with her on the *Daedalus*, and Starbuck on the *Galactica*.

"I don't understand all of it," she told Starbuck. "But we've got to trust Apollo. Baltar is some type of key, even if we would both love to carve him up and jettison the bits out to freeze in this cursed cloud."

"Yeah," Starbuck said, trying to smile. "Maybe Apollo will see the error of his ways and we'll get to chop Baltar into daggit food after all."

Suddenly, an alarm went off. Starbuck looked around; Athena turned back to work.

"Got to go," she said.

"Me, too," he told her. That was all they had time for.

It was the refugees from the *Hestia* on the barge, in transit to the *Rising Star*. It was unbelievable, but they were signaling that they were out of fuel. Adrift, helpless, on battery power, with the air growing bad. It was impossible!

"Starbuck, get your Vipers out there. They're…"

"I'm gone!" he cried, running out at full speed.

"I can't understand it," Athena said softly. "How could the barge be out of fuel?"

They were closer to the *Galactica* than to *Daedalus*. Now, the only hope was that the Vipers could reach them with extra fuel before the barge's air went bad. They were still centons from the *Rising Star*. She prayed to the Lords of Kobol that Starbuck would be fast enough.

Protea's words echoed. She'd been so sad; she said that she wouldn't see Athena again. Athena's heart shuddered. She hoped it wouldn't be true. How could it?

Baltar knew how it felt to have eyes cast upon him in hatred.

"How does it feel?" he asked Apollo as Apollo knelt and fastened the security device around Baltar's ankle. It was cold and dark; that was because Baltar was right where he was supposed to be, and Apollo was right there with him.

"What do you mean?" Apollo asked, looking up into Baltar's dark, brooding face.

"To have people hate you," Baltar said.

"Hate me?" Apollo asked. But he felt a sudden quick jolt of fear. Not anger —fear.

"People blamed me for the destruction of Caprica," Baltar said.

Apollo almost laughed. If there was any older news, Apollo didn't know what it would be. Baltar was still hashing over his treachery all those years ago!

"Do their eyes burn into you when you walk past, Apollo? Can you feel their resentment like a… shroud?"

Apollo snapped the device closed. He was rougher than he should have been, but now he was angry with Baltar. There wasn't time for game playing or Baltar's usual lies. They had to…

"People hate you, Apollo. For what you've done."

"What?" Apollo asked. "What are you talking about?"

"You don't need me to advise you on what's happening," Baltar said. "A blind man could see."

"We're having a lot of problems," Apollo said.

Baltar smiled.

"I never knew you to be good at understatement before," he said.

"You're enjoying this!" Apollo cried, springing away from Baltar. "I should never have…"

"No," Baltar said in a gentle voice. His expression looked almost… wise.

Apollo struggled to understand, struggled to see into Baltar's mysterious expression and into his twisted, obsessed heart.

"I won't enjoy walking to my quarters with you, Apollo," Baltar said. "I am grateful for your trust, and that you have released me. And I will take no pleasure in feeling the hatred of the people-directed at your back, friend, and not at mine. For once, not at mine."

Apollo tried to answer, but the old villain had completely struck him silent. What could anybody say to something like that?

Especially since it was true.

Chapter Two

WE'VE GOT a problem down here," Starbuck barked to Tigh on the bridge.

"I see that, Colonel," Tigh snapped back. "You should have reserves in Bay Three. Load that. Get over to the…"

"I'm in Bay Three," Starbuck said, feeling his temples throbbing. "There's nothing here. They said it's been gone a long time. They can't even remember…"

"Starbuck, I was standing right there when Apollo ordered two dozen fuel cells allocated to Bay Three as reserves. Now, you've been known to make…"

"I'm telling you, there's…" Starbuck thought his head really would explode. Was Tigh really turning into a real bureaucrat? "Maybe it's Bay Four," Starbuck said.

"It's Bay Three," Tigh said, his voice ragged with exhaustion and sharp with irritation.

"Tigh, I'm down here and…"

Apollo rushed onto the bridge at that moment and stepped beside Tigh.

"Starbuck, why haven't you launched the Vipers to get that fuel over to the barge?" he demanded.

"I've been trying to explain to Tigh here that these reserves just aren't here. There's a bunch of empty cells and that's it. I can't dump what we've got in the Vipers, can I? It'll…"

Apollo broke in. "Starbuck, I know you're not blind. There are two dozen reserve fuel cells in Bay Three. I had them personally…"

"Apollo, listen!" Starbuck cried. "There's nothing here."

"I gave that order," Apollo said.

Starbuck tried to think of the right thing to say. He was staring straight at an empty bay, with a few old cells lying on their sides, and a bunch of engineers and part-time Viper pilots shifting from foot to foot and looking like they'd rather be anywhere but in that bay with Colonel Starbuck, listening to that conversation.

"Commander Apollo wants to know where those cells are!" Starbuck cried. He didn't want to look at the time. He knew in his blood that time was running out for those refugees. And the air, too.

"We don't know," said one of the engineers. "We never had two dozen to begin with. Not in the reserve. We put what we had in…"

The patrol's out looking for Dalton, Troy and Trays, Starbuck realized. You couldn't split yourself in two and be in two places at once, he thought. Just like you couldn't fuel a Viper with the last cell you had, and then fuel a…

"Frack!" he cried. "Did you hear…"

"I heard," Apollo said. The silence hung between them.

"I'm taking the Vipers out anyway," Starbuck said. "Maybe we can…"

"Kill yourselves and everyone on that barge, too?" Apollo asked.

"We can. I don't know, Apollo. Maybe between all of the Vipers, we can work something out. We can use inertia, slingshot off each other to get back. The *Daedalus* is…"

"Athena's sending Vipers, too," Apollo said. "But since we're using the sub-light speeds, there's no way they can reach them. They're much closer to us. Starbuck, where's that fuel?"

Starbuck looked around the bay; it was so empty that he felt like his ragged breaths were echoing. The others backed away from him. They might have lost track of the reserve fuel cells for some reason that nobody was willing

to admit, but none of them were stupid. Anybody could have figured out that Starbuck was ready to explode.

"Starbuck, they've got about thirty centons!" Apollo said.

"I'm launching the Vipers," Starbuck said, breaking the connection.

"Starbuck!" Apollo cried, but he was already gone.

Apollo looked at Tigh, who looked back, his face full of apprehension.

. "Starbuck can buy them a few centons," Tigh said in a disheartened voice.

"Apollo," Athena's voice broke in from the bridge of the *Daedalus*. "I've got Vipers headed toward the barge, but their ETA is one centar, thirty centons."

"Okay, Athena," Apollo said. Again, he and Tigh looked at each other. Even if Starbuck got there and somehow transferred the Vipers' fuel to the barge. It was still half a centar too late.

Starbuck had never felt old before. It wasn't so much that he felt old right then, but his legs weren't moving right. Like his feet had gravity boots on them. Only there was nothing on them except his regular boots, the ones he wore every day.

It had been bad enough having to tell Athena that the fuel wasn't even close to enough to save that barge.

His mind couldn't deal with it. He knew what had happened. He saw it. He was there. He sat there and listened to the whole thing.

First there were cheers.

Then there was a lot of confusion.

Then there were curses, when it was obvious that the Vipers couldn't buy the barge more than a few centons of air.

It just didn't make any sense. Fuel leak, they said. The barge had been checked out before it set off from the *Daedalus* to that ship, *Hestia*. They

hadn't gone off course; in fact, they'd gotten a few lucky breaks along the way, gotten there faster than they'd expected.

Twenty crew, the captain, the first officer, and two hundred from the *Hestia*.

Athena's friend was on that ship. Athena wanted to know right away. And they sat there and they all listened while the barge died.

The worst of it had been someone banging on the hull. The comm went down, thank the Lords of Kobol, before the last of the air went, but there was banging. Clang! Clang! Clang!

And after a few centons, even that went away.

Athena never cried. Starbuck sat there and ripped off his comm so she wouldn't hear him swearing. She didn't need that. He listened to her cry when the last of the clangs stopped and no more came. It was her friend; she said she was angry, but Starbuck knew that she was grieving, too. After all they'd been through, to have those people go like that…

Apollo wanted to talk to Starbuck. Starbuck didn't know how he felt right then. He just knew that his legs weren't moving right and he had a blank spot in his chest. It was a little bit hard to breathe.

Tigh and Apollo were on the bridge. Starbuck thought that Apollo looked about as bad as Starbuck felt.

He went up to his friend. They both stood there, facing each other. What could somebody say after something like that? Some heroes, Starbuck thought. There wasn't anything much less heroic than what had just happened.

"I'm sorry," Apollo said. He put his hand on Starbuck's shoulder. Starbuck looked into Apollo's eyes.

"No, I'm sorry," Starbuck said. "I should have been able to save them. We should have been able to…"

"It's not your fault," Apollo said. "I gave those orders for those reserves to be put in Bay Three. I don't know what went wrong," he said.

Starbuck shook his head. "I don't, either. I swear, none of those guys down there had any clue. That really was the first they'd heard of it. I'd stake a month's pay on it."

Apollo shook his head. They stepped apart. It seemed disrespectful—wrong, even—to be talking about something like this in the wake of that kind of disaster.

They both walked to the comm.

"It's Athena," Tigh said.

Athena's face appeared; she looked calm, but Apollo knew right away what she had suffered from the look in her eyes. He glanced over at Starbuck, wondering if Starbuck realized.

"This doesn't make any sense," Athena said. "I've checked the manifests for that barge. They were fully-operational and fully-fueled before they left for the *Hestia*."

"They said, before…" Starbuck cleared his throat. "The captain said that the monitors were showing them at 6O°/o fuel when they just stopped. He had them check manually and they were bone dry. Nothing left."

"That's insane," Athena said. "That's just about impossible."

"I agree," Tigh said. "Unless the crew was totally incompetent or out of their minds. Who could misread fuel like that?"

"I take responsibility. They launched from *Daedalus*," Athena said.

"No," Apollo said. "It's all my responsibility. I gave the orders for those reserves to be held. They should have been there. If they were, we could have solved the problem, no matter what the cause."

"Apollo, it was a horrible accident," Tigh said.

"We've got to investigate," Apollo told Tigh. "This makes no sense at all no matter how we look at it. Those people died for…"

"Indeed!" came a voice, low, cultured and modulated.

Apollo, Tigh and Starbuck turned to see an infrequent visitor to the bridge. Sire Aron, the most powerful of the civilians on the Council of Twelve. Aron had been on the Council since the earliest days after the fleet's escape from the destruction of Caprica, but it was only since Adama's death that he had become more influential.

"This is a horrible tragedy," Aron said. "Two hundred men, women and children, plus the crew."

"Yes," Apollo said. "We'll discover the cause."

"I hope so," Aron said. "I hope that you will come to the Council, Apollo. We would like to speak with you."

"Of course," Apollo said. Tigh looked over at him, his eyes flashing warnings, but Apollo nodded toward the council member.

"I'll investigate and report," Tigh said, stepping forward.

"I know that you will, President Tigh," Sire Aron said, smiling in a sad, forlorn way. "But at this point, the Council would like to speak with Commander Apollo."

"We have information from the *Daedalus*," Athena said, breaking in. The connection was still open, and she could see and hear everything. Aron's white eyebrows raised in surprise; apparently, he hadn't realized that they were speaking with her from the bridge of the *Daedalus*.

"Oh, of course," Aron said. "Thank you. I have heard that you knew some of the people on that barge… the evacuees."

"Yes," Athena said. "I'm sure others lost friends as well. My first officer here also lost people."

"Ah," Aron said. "This is a great tragedy."

"Yes," Athena said. "It is. Now, if you excuse me, I have a ship to run." She broke her transmission.

Briefly shaking everyone's hand, Aron turned and left as quickly as he came. As soon as the doors slid shut, Starbuck turned to Apollo.

"I don't like that guy," he said.

Apollo shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "He and my father never got along, but he's got a certain dignity. I think he's genuinely concerned."

"Apollo, let me deal with the Council," Tigh said.

"No," Apollo said, smiling gently at Tigh. "The Council needs to understand our full situation. And I need to be the one to tell them."

As soon as Apollo started off the bridge, another alarm went off.

"Frack!" Starbuck said. He was standing beside Tigh; Tigh had muttered something about the reserve fuel cells having to be *somewhere*, and Starbuck was burning to find out where they'd gotten off to, and thinking about what he'd do to the idiot who'd misplaced them.

It was the head of the security team on the *Rising Star*, and he was in the middle of a firefight.

"They've taken six of our guards prisoner. They're holding them in the casino and threatening to execute them if we don't release a secton's worth of food. They say we have real food on the *Galactica*, too—they don't believe it's just pellets."

Apollo ran back, standing beside Tigh and Starbuck.

"Can you hold your position, Lieutenant?" Apollo asked.

"Yeah," the man said. Then he seemed to realize whom he was talking to and said, "I mean yes, sir."

"Lieutenant, who is 'they'?" Apollo asked.

"Rebels, sir. They're everywhere. They're organized. The leader's called…" And then the transmission broke up.

Apollo waited, pounding his fist on the comm. "Come on!" he said. As if on cue, the transmission returned.

"They call him Jinkrat… plenty of weapons and they're holed up in the casino, but they're raiding… through the ship. We knew there were a lot of problems, but we never…" The transmission didn't break up, but the man stopped, and Tigh, Apollo and Starbuck listened to the whine of laser fire. Then, the Lieutenant was back.

"We can hold, sir, but I've got to go. Report back in… centons."

"Thank you," Apollo said. But the transmission went out with a fierce crackle.

"Well, that's just great," Starbuck said. "Jinkrat! What kind of name is that? I suppose they'll want some Pyramid decks to restock the casino, some dancing girls and…"

"Starbuck!" Apollo cried. He couldn't help but grin; although there wasn't anything to laugh about at all.

"Has anyone ever told you that your sense of humor is hardly appropriate, Starbuck?" Tigh growled.

"Don't get your pants in a knot just because you got President tagged onto your name," Starbuck shot back.

Apollo watched in astonishment as Tigh's brows lowered, his dark eyes flashed, and his fists balled at his side. "Starbuck," Tigh growled.

"Tigh," Starbuck said, dragging out Tigh's name and grinning.

Then Tigh suddenly laughed, short and sharp. "I should break your nose," he said.

"You could try," Starbuck replied.

Apollo grabbed both of his friends' arms and brought their hands together.

"I need you both right now," he said. "I'd rather face fifty squadrons of battle-crazed Cylons than that Council," he said.

"We have rebels, too," Tigh said.

Apollo nodded. "I know," he said. "But let's see what we can do with the Council first."

Then, Athena was back, calling them all back.

"That was quick!" Starbuck said.

"I didn't want to keep talking with Council member Aron there," Athena said.

Apollo felt waves of anxiety coming from his sister's face. "What do you mean?" he said.

"I'm probably just thrown off because of everything that's happened," she said. "I just didn't have a good feeling when he was there. And Omega had some more news about the barge."

"What's that?" Apollo asked.

"They triple-checked," Athena said. "Triple-checked the fuel before they left. I've got the records right here."

"It's just impossible," Tigh said.

"You're telling me," Athena said. "Omega's on it, though. We got the transmission from the *Rising Star*, too. Let me take a team over there and get this calmed down while you see to the Council. I think that Dr. Salik can spare Cassi, too, so we'll meet her from the *Galactica* on the way. There are already injured."

"Good," Apollo said. At least this way some people would get some help. He was still reeling from the loss of those refugees.

"Hey," Starbuck said. "Athena, are you…"

"Starbuck, don't tell me what I can and cannot do," Athena snapped.

"I didn't mean that," Starbuck said.

"Well, what did you mean?" Athena demanded.

"We can't fight," Apollo broke in. "Starbuck, cut it out. Tigh, let's get going."

"Apollo, do well," Athena told him.

Starbuck lingered, looking at her image for a moment, then he turned and followed Tigh and Apollo from the bridge.

Don't tell Athena what to do! As if he would, even if he could!

"Apollo, is it my imagination, or is Athena more on edge than usual lately?" Starbuck asked Apollo as the trio headed toward the Council chambers.

"Starbuck," Apollo said, shaking his head. Even Tigh laughed.

"I would rather fight you than Athena," Tigh said in a deadpan voice.

"I don't know about me," Starbuck snapped back, "But I'm not surprised to hear that you're scared to fight a woman."

"Cut it out!" Apollo cried. They were all three somewhat composed as they entered the Council chambers.

"You know, Apollo," Starbuck said as he entered. "I was thinking. That barge. There's no way any crew could be that confused. They had to have set out with a lot less fuel than they thought they had. They would have noticed any leak a lot sooner. I don't think there was a leak; we didn't get anything off the sensors. It's like a… plot. One of Baltar's plots."

"Baltar's under control," Apollo said. The doors were opening to the council chamber.

"Apollo," Starbuck said, but Apollo quieted him with a brief gesture.

"We can't worry about Baltar now," Apollo said. He thought of Baltar's dark, twisted face and deep, frightening eyes. Maybe Baltar was responsible, in some way. Maybe Apollo had been wrong to let Baltar out with just that security device around his ankle. A little premonition of danger and betrayal played up and down Apollo's spine. It wasn't like Baltar had been of any help so far—not with anything.

Maybe he should be back in the brig, chained, where not even his guards could speak to him. Talking too much to Baltar just wasn't safe.

But Apollo had freed him. The intuition that had prompted him to do that had been a sure one, a powerful conviction. But he still had doubts about it. Now that he wasn't looking straight at Baltar, Apollo wondered how he could have imagined that Baltar was anything but a poisonous snake.

As they entered the sumptuous chambers, Apollo thought about the Council, and how they'd never done anything but make trouble for *Galactica* and the fleet. If they had their way, they would have talked and talked until not a single ship would have escaped the Cylons back when Caprica was being destroyed, much less the carnage they'd survived since.

But the Council existed, and just like his father before him, Apollo had to shoulder the responsibility of dealing with these so-called friends who'd never acted like anything but enemies in their midst.

"Apollo!" Sire Aron cried, walking toward the three of them, smiling, his arms open wide in an expansive, gracious greeting.

Athena arrived on the *Rising Star* with the best squadron of warriors from the *Daedalus*. She wondered briefly how Apollo was faring with the Council. Cassiopeia had met the *Daedalus* transport halfway and she was right beside Athena, carrying her medkit.

As they entered the *Rising Star*, the stink was the first thing that Athena noticed. The dirty air, poorly scrubbed, the whole system under the stress of the hundreds of refugees that had been taken to the formerly beautiful recreation ship. The very walls had been torn apart, as if their formerly rich coverings had been cannibalized. It smelled of fire, sweat, and human

waste. A body slumped in the docking bay; it stank so badly that there was no telling how long it had been there. It was a man, of middle age, wearing the short jacket of an agriculturalist. His dead hand clutched at the ruined deck.

They had a long way to go to reach the existing security team, two decks away, not far from the rebel's base in the casino.

Cassi put her hand to her mouth and started toward the man, but she paused, looking up at Athena, her eyes wide. The man had been reaching toward something at the moment of his death. Not a weapon, but something that Athena at once recognized: a soft toy daggit. A child's toy, now torn and blackened from laser fire. When he had died, the man had been carrying it, or had been trying to get it. Where was his child now? What had happened on this ship?

The stench was so strong that they all covered their faces.

Seeing Cassi's fear and grief-filled eyes, Athena wondered what Cassi thought about her and Starbuck—the whole thing—maybe she ought to say something to Cassi. Death was real, all around them, and maybe she'd never get another chance to talk to Cassi, tell her that she didn't resent Cassi's relationship with Starbuck, and she hoped that Cassi wouldn't, but those thoughts were forgotten in a micron.

They were under attack!

Cassi ducked, her soft blond hair falling like wings over her face. Athena crouched beside the half-open docking bay doors, firing down the corridor in the direction of the blinding laser flashes, using all her experience and training. Instinctively, she protected Cassi with her body. The others, even exhausted and drained as they were, both men and women, old and young, had spread out, immediately laying down heavy fire without Athena issuing an order.

Perhaps the dead man had been killed when the guards had been captured. And those guards had not gone without a fight. Athena remembered the last time she'd visited the *Rising Star*, the luxurious docking bay had been filled

with happy, smiling people, visiting for some badly needed R&R. Now she was fighting for her life in a burned-out wreck, the beautiful walls pitted by laser blasts, blackened and destroyed.

"Put down your weapons!" she cried.

The only answer was another barrage of laser fire.

They had no lack of firepower. Arming the civilians had been a necessity as the battles with the Cylons and Chitain had raged. Now, those same weapons were being turned against Athena and the Colonial Warriors. But the opposing fire became sporadic, with long breaks between bluefire blasts. She motioned silently for the others to advance; if they weren't going to respond at all, the rebels would have to be taken out.

"Run for it!" she heard someone cry. It wasn't on their side—the voice came from down the hall, barely audible over the whining blasts.

All at once, it was just Athena's force from *Galactica* firing. Athena raised her hand to stop the fire. She listened; there were footsteps echoing down the hall.

"After them!" she cried. With a brief look at Cassi, she told the medtech to stay put. Athena led the charge down the corridor.

Soon, she saw the back of one of the rebels. It looked like a boy, hardly more than twelve yahrens, and he wasn't running very fast. As his long gray cloak swirled, she saw the reason why: He'd been hit.

The boy stumbled, then went down on one knee, crying out in pain.

"Don't kill me!" he said, his voice full of fear. As Athena reached him and knelt down, he drew something out of his cloak.

A Battlestar-issued laser pistol, aimed right at her face.

His face was thin and pale, but streaked with smoke and dirt. His hand trembled.

"Don't touch me!" he cried.

"Give me that," Athena said. She didn't think that she sounded hard or mean, but she saw his eyes widen and his jaw harden.

"I mean it!" he said. His hand was shaking like he was piloting an out-of-control Viper.

The others gathered around; the boy was covered. He was desperate, but not stupid. He pointed the pistol at her one final time, then his arm fell limply to his side, and his fingers released its grip—Athena took the weapon. As soon as she touched it, he tried to scramble away, once more crying out.

"Cassi come quick!" Athena cried. "This boy has been hurt." Athena moved aside to let Cassi look at the boy. He was badly hurt, Athena realized, but tough. He wasn't crying, even though "the enemy" surrounded him. What kind of people, she wondered, would send a boy out like that to fight Colonial Warriors?

"What's your name?" Cassi asked, kneeling by him and gently examining his wounded leg. It was badly burned, but with Athena's long experience, she knew he'd be all right with the proper treatment, a few sectars' rest, and the proper food. But even with the team there, it wasn't likely he'd get any of that.

"I won't tell," he said, closing his eyes and shuddering from the pain as Cassi probed his wound.

"We're here to help everyone," Athena said. "This trouble won't get anybody anywhere, and people will only get hurt."

"I don't believe you," the boy said.

Then his face twisted and he almost snarled at Athena. "You killed my brother!" he cried, struggling. For a brief moment, Athena wondered if he'd been one of the kids on the *Hestia*, but that was impossible; Protea and all the others had suffocated, only centars before.

Cassi put out her hand, trying to gently calm the boy, but he pulled his shoulders away from her. She looked up at Athena, her eyes confused and full of trepidation.

"I can't have killed your brother," Athena said. "I don't even know him. We've come…"

"No!" the boy cried. Again, he tried to struggle to his feet, but the pain held him down as effectively as if the other warriors had gathered around to restrain him. Some of them looked like they wanted to, but Athena didn't know what to make of the boy, and would not see him handled roughly. With a single gesture, she held them all back.

"My brother died because there wasn't any medicine. There was the big battle, and we all prayed for a healer," the boy said.

"I'm a healer," Cassi said. "I'm here now."

"We've brought her," Athena said. "We want to…"

"Ow!" the boy cried as Cassi probed the grievous wound on his leg as gently as she could.

"I'm sorry," Cassi said, stroking the dark hair away from his face. The boy's eyes opened and he looked up at Cassi. Athena realized once more how Cassi had the healing gift, because a small smile crossed the boy's face, and he tried to be brave once more.

"Just let me take care of him," Cassi said, looking up at Athena. "I can get him stabilized; there'll be time for questions later."

"We don't have time for that," Athena said.

Cassi's large, bright eyes flashed. She was gentle most of the time, but even Athena had to grant that Cassiopeia had a temper when someone came between her and a patient. And right now, as usual, Athena was acting like a cold-blooded, unsympathetic person.

"We came here to take care of people," Cassi said.

"We didn't exactly get the welcome committee," Athena said stubbornly. But she turned and ordered two of the warriors to stay with Cassi and the boy.

"Get him stable," she told Cassi, trying not to sound too harsh.

"And you, boy," Athena said, kneeling close to the stubborn child, "You'll talk later. We're going after this rebel Jinkrat."

The boy's eyes widened. "No!" he cried.

"What?" Athena asked.

"You can't," the boy said. "He's my—" and then the boy fell silent. "I don't trust you," he said after a micron. "You killed my brother. I was right there. I saw it."

"What are you talking about?" Athena demanded, not caring right then that she'd pushed Cassi aside and interrupted her examination.

The reconnaissance team was all ears, too, but Athena didn't have time to worry about any of the niceties.

"My—Jinkrat—says you have all the food. He's going to get the Council to get us what's ours, and forget about the warriors and the *Galactica*."

"He says that, does he?" Athena turned to face the warriors. She nodded. Now this rebel Jinkrat was in real trouble.

"Yeah," the boy said. "When…" and again the boy paused, seeming to think for a moment, "When Jinkrat talks, people listen. We don't have anything to eat, and there's no healers." He leaned back against Cassi, his face suddenly white with pain.

"Does this Jinkrat know who he's dealing with?" Athena asked.

The boy looked up at her, nodding. "I know who you are," he said. "I've seen your picture."

"You do?" Athena asked, sitting back and putting her hands on her knees. This really was some kid.

"You're Commander Apollo's sister. Commander of the *Daedalus!* My—Jinkrat—says Apollo's history. He got us into this trouble and he's been

taking all the food for himself. He made those people die on that ship—they were on their way here. And Apollo killed my brother. As sure as he put a laser blast into him. And you did, too!"

"Is that what everyone thinks?" Athena asked.

"Let him be," Cassi said. "He's becoming unstable with all these questions." She showed Athena the flashing medical analyzer.

"Cassi, we can't sit around on our astrums chatting. I need information, now!"

"Athena!" Cassi cried.

Looking back down at the boy, Athena could hardly believe what she saw. His eyes were closed tight, and it looked like, after everything that had happened, he'd reached the end of his self-control. He was going to break down. He didn't cry, but he opened his eyes wide and reached up toward Athena with a trembling arm.

"Wait!" he cried. "My name's Koren," he said. "My dad, my dad's a good man. He doesn't want nobody to get hurt. He doesn't want nobody else to die."

"Lie still, Koren," Cassi said, comforting the boy. "I'm sure your father's a fine man."

Athena felt rage building up inside. How dare this rebel Jinkrat send a boy like this out to fight? And these lies about Apollo? Convincing the boy that Apollo was responsible for his brother's death—killing the refugees! That was a tragedy—unavoidable—and what was this about stealing food? It reminded her of Baltar—that was something he'd pull.

Only now it sounded like they had a new enemy to deal with, and he was ruthless, just like Baltar.

Cassi held Koren close to her and stroked his hair, whispering words of comfort in his ear.

"You can't do any more, Koren," Athena told him. "None of those things you said are true, but it's not your fault. You've been very brave. I'm proud of you," she said. Koren looked over Cassi's shoulder at Athena. She saw the uncertainty in his tear-filled eyes. He was taking a chance—he didn't know that he could trust Athena—a terrible chance. Looking at his thin face, she wondered how long it had been since he'd had any rations. The whole thing was so twisted, stupid, and evil she had to believe that it was somehow Baltar's doing.

Apollo should never have let Baltar free.

"Get a message back to the *Galactica* and *Daedalus* about what we've found," Athena ordered one of her team.

"Please, listen," Koren said.

Athena turned back.

"My dad doesn't know I was fighting," he said. "He'll be… he'll be grateful that you helped me."

"I'm sure he will," Cassi said, continuing to stabilize and treat the boy.

"Koren, you're only eleven yahrens," Athena said. "Of course your father wouldn't…"

"I'm twelve!" Koren exclaimed.

Athena had to force herself not to laugh. This boy reminded her of Boxey! So proud, so heedless of danger, so impulsive.

"You have to promise not to tell my dad," Koren said.

"I can't promise to lie, Koren. But we'll get you back to the *Galactica* for treatment, and have you back here with your dad. By that time, this rebellion will be stopped," Athena said.

"No!" Koren cried.

Athena turned to Cassiopeia. "Cassi, get the boy back to the shuttle," she told the medtech. "See that he's comfortable and get him something to eat."

Koren's face changed in an instant at the thought of having something to eat.

Athena didn't have much more time to think of him as she gathered the warriors to go after the rebel, Jinkrat. She didn't know what they'd find. The welcoming committee had robbed her team of the element of surprise, but she didn't know any group of ragtag colonists who could stand up to them.

"Come on," she said to the others. "Let's go find this Jinkrat and put a stop to this."

The warriors looked between each other.

"You should call him first," Koren said.

"What?" Athena said, turning.

"I can give you the frequency," Koren said.

"You can?" Athena asked, again fighting back laughter and shaking her head at the boy's naive, but bold, nature.

"Sure," Koren said. "Jinkrat's my—Jinkrat's my dad!" he blurted. "But you have to promise not tell him that I was fighting. Please?" the boy begged. Athena walked back to the boy, her head spinning.

"Your… father?" she said slowly.

"That's right," Koren said. "My dad's a hero. And besides, when he talks, people listen. So you should talk to him!"

Athena watched the rebel leader as he approached, surrounded by grim-faced and ragged—but heavily armed—men and women.

His face was worn, heavily lined. A fresh scar snaked across his right cheek. He was tall, but not as tall as Apollo, and slightly more heavily built. She found it hard to judge the man's age, but guessed that he'd been very

young when the fleet had fled the Cylon destruction of the twelve colonies. Like the dead man whose hand had been reaching for the toy daggit, Jinkrat wore the fitted jacket of the agriculturalist, but pockets had been added for munitions. Jinkrat bristled with weapons, but he did not wear them as a man who was either comfortable or used to them.

He wasn't smiling.

As he approached, the Colonial Warriors stood ready, rifles and pistols aimed at rebel heads and chests.

The rebels in turn looked ready to fire at a micron's notice.

"So, you wish to take another son of mine," Jinkrat said. That was his greeting. There was little anger in his voice, more of grief and sadness.

"No," Athena said. "We came to talk. Cassiopeia is a healer; she has already been…"

Jinkrat regarded Cassiopeia, and a brief smile crossed his face. "You are of Gemoni," he said to her.

Cassi's lovely face showed a frown, and then she smiled. "Yes, and you?"

Jinkrat nodded. "I was an agriculturalist. Before—the trouble," he said.

"I was not always a healer," Cassi said, but that was all she said. Athena watched as a kind of silent communication passed between the two.

"I see," Jinkrat said, his voice heavy with sadness and exhaustion. "You do not come exclusively to murder."

"No!" Athena said. "We wanted to talk. You have hostages. We've got to…"

"I'll take my boy," Jinkrat said, seemingly uninterested in a word Athena had to offer.

"He's hurt," Cassi said, stepping forward. "You can see how seriously. We must take him back to the *Galactica* for treatment. I can't treat him here. This is for Dr. Salik to…"

"Yes," Jinkrat said curtly. "I see he's in need of a doctor."

Then he went to Koren's side, brushing through his armed rebels as if they were children, ignoring the hard looks of the Colonial Warriors and their deadly rifles and pistols, kneeling by Koren with not a trace of fear or apprehension.

"Koren, you have not been honest," Jinkrat said. Koren's face curled up like a burning leaf. His eyes grew damp and his cheeks flared. "No," he said.

"But…"

"Butts are what you sit on, Koren," Jinkrat said, and Athena— in no mood for laughter—watched in amazement as a genuine smile crossed the hard-bitten rebel's face and Koren's eyes went wide.

"I'm sorry, Dad," Koren said.

Athena started to step forward. Suddenly she was filled with desire to speak up for the boy, who had been brave, and who had told the truth. An honest, good boy—even if he did have a mouth on him. And Athena was burning to discover why this man blamed Apollo and her for the death of his son. Where could this have come from? She had no sense that Jinkrat, even as hard as he seemed, was dishonest or greedy. He had to…

"I know," Jinkrat said. "I can't punish you now. I must send you with them." Then, he looked up at Athena, his eyes narrowing.

"Reluctant as I am to trust," he said, voice filled with bitter anger.

"Koren said something about…" Athena said, but Jinkrat interrupted her by standing and straightening his shoulders.

As if he was a military commander—as imperious as Cain had ever been—he pointed at Athena and said sternly, "You may take my son to the doctor on the *Galactica*. But I want him returned safely within three days. If not, you will lose your hostages, madam. I promise you that. And you will never reach your security team. They live because I allow it. They are as much my prisoners as the others."

"Wait," Athena said.

"No," Jinkrat said. "It is you who must wait. I will tell you now, because you need to understand you are at my mercy: We have planted a bomb aboard the *Galactica*. In three sectares it will detonate, crippling the *Galactica* and destroying all that you highborn in command hold dear. Do you understand me? My son must be healed. I place him in the custody of my fellow Gemonese, this healer."

And he looked toward Cassi, whose eyes were wide, astonished.

"You don't understand—we've had no choice. We've had to ration food, redirect all fuel to the Viper patrols," Athena said, her heart pounding. A bomb!

"I know of your 'redirection' of fuel. It cost more than two hundred lives, madam!"

Athena felt her face grow cold. "I had a dear friend on that ship," she said. "You don't know what you're talking about."

Jinkrat's face softened, but only a moment. "You will search for the bomb I have planted," he said, his eyes dark and veiled. "You will not find it. You will deliver my son to me, healed; you will meet the demands I have put upon you. You will no longer starve my people. No more will die in space, choking for air. Are we clear, Commander?"

"You have made a terrible mistake, Jinkrat. We're not your enemy. We're doing everything humanly possible, but there really is no food to give you." As Athena looked at the rebel leader, she realized that although he had great self-control, he was nearly trembling with rage and hatred—aimed at her!

But Jinkrat had said all that he was going to say to Athena. "Koren," he said, looking toward his son. "Stay strong. Be well. I wait for the moment that we meet again."

Athena made to follow the rebel leader as he strode back to his group of fighters. The colonials and the rebels glared at each other. Athena stayed the hands of the warriors who were restless, eager to fight. She could tell from

the expressions on the rebels that they, too, would have liked to fight it out there in the docking bay. But the force with Jinkrat was already far larger than Athena could have ever pictured. There were hundreds of them, all crowded around.

There was nothing she could do for the security team. Not right now. And that bomb!

"Dad," Koren said softly, but Jinkrat was already too far away to hear him.

Athena looked at the boy, torn, and she came to her choice, issuing her orders. "Back to the *Galactica*, then *Daedalus*," she told them. "We can do no more here."

"Apollo, we grieve," Sire Aron said as Apollo and Starbuck watched the Council of Twelve file into their richly appointed chamber.

"As do I," Apollo said.

"These deaths weigh heavily," Aron said, turning toward the other council members.

"You need to know the truth," Apollo said to Aron, surveying the rest of the Council. How many of them could understand? He started to explain the nature of the *Ur* cloud, how the Tylium reactors couldn't be repaired, how the Viper patrols were the only way out.

"We understand," Aron said in a soft voice. "But we have… other questions for you."

"Anything," Apollo said, nodding at the graying council member. Aron and Adama had never gotten along, but he remembered Adama speaking of the old council member with grudging respect.

"We are considering grounding all of the Viper patrols and other… unnecessary… procedures," Aron said, looking around at the Council.

Apollo realized that he was asking for their support; wordlessly. There was a different type of command. You're no politician, Apollo, he reminded

himself. They weren't all cowards, he thought, looking at the mostly old faces that represented the civilian factions of the fleet.

Why would someone do that? Become a council member? Baltar had been a member of the Council of Twelve; the high-water mark for his career, he seemed to think. In fact, nearly everything Baltar had ever done had been motivated by his desire for recognition and respect from others.

The faces of the council—Apollo looked into the eyes of each of them. Yes, some were greedy. Others selfish. Some were even stupid. But others; well, a few truly seemed to care, to want to serve. And still others were there because it was what they were born to do. Sit in a closed room and argue about things that didn't really matter.

But when a man faced death, he had to fight. You couldn't talk it out with a Cylon; Iblis wasn't some… thing… that could be negotiated with. And talk didn't make food, or fuel.

So, that was what Apollo said.

"Apollo," Aron said. "We have other questions. We understand the danger, I assure you. But what happened to the fuel on that barge?"

"We're investigating," Apollo said.

"Two hundred men, women and children died. An entire crew! Apollo, we have information that someone… took their fuel," Aron said.

"What information?" Apollo demanded. "Why haven't you immediately…"

"There is already rebellion," Aron said, nodding toward the other council members. They were scared, most of them, Apollo realized. He felt his eyes narrowing. They were afraid… of him!

"What are you saying?" Apollo asked Aron.

"I am very sorrowful at this… development," Aron said. "But we have reliable information that Starbuck could have saved that ship if he'd had the reserve fuel available."

"That's true!" Starbuck burst out. "We…"

"You're a good man, Starbuck," Aron said. "I know that you did everything under *your* control."

"We are still investigating the cause of the tragedy," Apollo said.

"Well," Aron said, sighing and looking as though he'd rather be anywhere but in that chamber. "I'm afraid that the question that needs to be answered is, 'where did you hide those extra fuel cells and what happened to the fuel that should have been on that rescue barge?'"

"We don't know! I ordered it to be… " Apollo couldn't believe it. Now the whole council was in an uproar, many of them demanding to know "why?" and "where?"

"Hide those fuel cells?" Starbuck cried. Apollo had.to grab Starbuck's arm to hold him back.

"Perhaps you are as unaware of the mood in the rest of the fleet as you are of where your fuel is and where the food rations are."

"A new leader has arisen," Aron said. "One who must be dealt with diplomatically, not with violence and destruction. We have had enough of that."

Apollo waited for the Council Leader to continue. A glance at Starbuck showed Apollo that his friend looked like he'd rather be facing Iblis and the Cylon fleet single-handed than standing in the Council chambers.

"What a fracking piece of felgercarb," Starbuck said under his breath. "Diplomatically!"

"Just hold on," Apollo whispered back, looking toward the rest of the Council.

"I'm not a mind reader," Starbuck said, loudly enough that Apollo wondered if Aron had heard him, but the old man showed no reaction.

"We have the situation under control," Sire Aron announced. "The rebel leader has some… demands," he said. "The Council is ordering you to see to it that those demands are met."

"What demands?" Apollo asked. It went without saying that these rebels shouldn't be negotiated with, but it looked like Aron and the Council had already done a lot of that.

"They want one sectar's worth of food, delivered directly to their leader," Aron said, "plus additional fuel and a team of medtechs and medicine."

"What?" Starbuck cried. Apollo silenced him with a nudge—a movement that he hoped the council members wouldn't see.

"You know as well as I do that we have only three or four sectares of food left," Apollo said. "Our reserves of fuel are very low."

"Are you quite certain?" Aron asked.

"Yes," Apollo said. "I have…"

"Where is the fuel that was to be held in reserve in Bay Three?" Aron asked. His voice was mild. He looked like he regretted every word.

"I—we don't know," Apollo said.

Aron sighed. "Under the circumstances, Apollo, the Council has no choice but to take command. You have proven that you have no control over what is happening in the fleet. We have… many questions."

"What are you trying to get at, Aron?" Starbuck cried. "What type of—"

"Well, if the fuel was there, where did it go, Starbuck?" Aron asked Starbuck, not Apollo.

Starbuck shrugged. "Nobody knew," he said. "They were completely…"

Apollo silenced Starbuck with a quick, angry look. "We will discover what is happening," Apollo said. "Allow us to complete the investigation and I promise the Council a full report in…"

"Apollo," Aron said. "I am sorry to have to say this. You must believe me. But we are fully convinced that you have allocated the extra fuel reserves for your *own* use and that… that you knew that ship would never make it to the *Rising Star*. You knew that those people were already desperate and starving."

"No!" Apollo cried.

"Then, what other explanation is there? Who controls the fuel and the food but you?"

"I…" Apollo said. This was beyond belief. Now he looked at the Council members again, and back at Starbuck, who was staring, openmouthed, unable to believe what was being said. And Aron was so sad; it was obvious that he believed that every word was true.

"I control it," Apollo said. "I take full responsibility for the tragedy. I am responsible for the rationing. We are—"

"We are taking control," Aron said. "The Council must institute its civilian authority. Lives are at stake, Apollo. You alone cannot choose who will live and who will die."

"But I…" Apollo said.

"I have already spoken with the rebel leader. Perhaps you are unaware of the support that he already has," Aron said.

Apollo thought of Athena and her mission to the *Rising Star*, but now was hardly the time to bring that up. And Aron, negotiating behind Apollo's back—behind Tigh's back? What was happening?

"As I said, we have completed our negotiations with the rebel leader and his faction on the *Rising Star*," Aron continued. "Fortunately for all of us, cooler heads have prevailed and this man Jinkrat wants only food and medical care immediately, and no further violence."

"Listen," Apollo said. "Have you been to the sick bay? We have no additional medtechs. Dr. Salik is overwhelmed. Even…"

"Considering our situation, we cannot accept this internal fighting," Aron said. The entire council nodded. Apollo began to realize how Aron had swayed the other council members to his side. They weren't fighters—they never had been. Some of them were hardened politicians and these Apollo knew couldn't be trusted under any circumstances. But just as Sire Adar and all the others had swayed the council against Adama on many occasions, they were permanent civilians one and all. They didn't understand military or security necessities. They never could. It was simply beyond them.

Why hadn't he seen this coming? But how could he have seen it? People were dying; decisions had to be made every micron. There had been no time to worry about the Council.

No time.

And where had that fuel gone? Apollo wracked his brain one more time. Somebody… it had to have been stolen. But who?

Aron looked deeply worried. The Council was arguing about the rebels. That had to be it, Apollo thought. The rebel leader—this Jinkrat—he'd already taken over the *Rising Star,* or close to it. Greed: that was it. Jinkrat was greedily trying to take everything. This "negotiation" with the Council —Jinkrat was another junior Baltar rising up.

"We can't trust these rebels!" Apollo cried, slamming his fist on the council table.

"Apollo," Aron said softly, leaning close to him. "I'm afraid that it's not the rebels we're afraid of."

Apollo just looked at the old man, unable to say anything. He didn't need special insight to read the expression on Aron's face, and the deep suspicion that was growing in his eyes.

"It is *you* we do not trust."

"I…" Apollo said, but he realized that there was nothing he could say. He had no answers.

"Ground all Viper patrols and collect all of the remaining food and fuel into central locations on *Galactica* and *Daedalus*," Aron said, his voice suddenly full of firm command.

"Those are the Council's orders. Disobey them on peril of… treason," Aron said. And then, as though he was grieving, he drew the hood of his cloak up and bowed his head.

Apollo left the Council Chambers, stunned. But he was soon back into action.

"Let's get going," he told Starbuck. "I've got to make sure Tigh knows what to do. And we've got to warn Athena. We can't risk their lives on the *Rising Star*. It's obvious there's a lot more to this rebellion than we thought. That rebel has gotten hold of the fuel; there probably are spies on the *Galactica*, and *Daedalus*, too. That's where the barge launched from."

"What do you have in mind, Apollo?" Starbuck asked, his eyes wide.

"You'll see," Apollo said enigmatically.

"Why don't we just go over to the *Rising Star* and blast all those rebels? Get that so-called… what—Rat?" Starbuck asked.

"Jinkrat," Apollo said, looking over at Starbuck's furious face. Starbuck would never understand politics. But Apollo was grateful for that; Starbuck could be counted on in a crisis and whatever he said was what he meant.

"Whatever," Starbuck said. "I'd like to get some time alone with him. What —rat? Bilgerat!"

Apollo couldn't help but smile as he gave Starbuck a friendly shove in the direction of Blue Squadron's bays. "Get going," Apollo told him. "Just get those Vipers up and I'll keep you posted."

"Vipers!" Starbuck said. "But…"

"I know," Apollo said. "But I can't let the Council ground the fleet no matter what they think they're trying to accomplish. We've got big problems with

this rebellion right now, but if we don't find a way out of this cloud, this is just the beginning."

Starbuck nodded, then a grin flashed over his face. "I get it!" he said. "If we're in the air, we—"

"Can just stay there and buy us some time."

"Good thinking," Starbuck said.

Apollo almost made a wisecrack back, but he didn't feel much like it. Lords of Kobol—how could things get worse?

He left Starbuck and went on to meet Tigh on the bridge. President Tigh; well, the Council had just done a huge end run around him. Apollo knew that Tigh would be furious, but right now, maybe it was better that he was on the bridge, instead of back there struggling with the Council, trying to answer questions that didn't have any answers.

Apollo desperately wanted to warn Athena that there was more on the *Rising Star* than they'd bargained for, and hoped that Starbuck could get those Vipers—Blue Squadron and the others—in flight, and keep them there.

Jinkrat's face was grim as he tried for the third time to reach Council Leader Aron. Aron was the only one of the highborn who seemed to take an interest in his people's plight, something that the Colonial Warriors and Apollo never had.

Finally, the old man's face appeared on Jinkrat's jerry-rigged comm.

"Friend," Sire Aron said, smiling broadly.

Jinkrat didn't return the smile.

"The Colonials attempted to board *Rising Star*," Jinkrat informed Sire Aron.

"What?" Aron cried, his smile disappearing in an instant.

"Yes, led by Apollo's sister, Athena," Jinkrat said.

"A tragedy!" Aron cried. "How… how?"

"No one died," Jinkrat said. "They did not press beyond the docking bay. But…" Jinkrat wrestled with what he would say about Koren to Aron, the only one on *Galactica* who cared and who had any power. Jinkrat thought a moment, then decided to risk his trust with the old council member.

"They took my son. He was injured. Athena and a woman of Gemoni, a healer. They are bringing him to *Galactica*," he said.

"Lords," Aron whispered, his face full of concern. "You must have…"

"I did not trust Athena," Jinkrat said. "I warned her. I must…" Jinkrat debated long and hard whether or not to tell Aron about the bomb. At last, he made his choice. Aron had family, too. Jinkrat could not assume that there were only guilty, violent, greedy warriors aboard the *Galactica*. And, Koren's life was at risk, no matter what. They would probably kill Koren immediately if Jinkrat was forced to detonate the explosive. He had to have a…

"What is it?" Aron asked.

"My people have planted an… explosive… aboard *Galactica*."

"A bomb!" Aron cried, his white eyebrows shooting up in shock.

"I had no choice," Jinkrat said, shaking his head. "We have no Vipers. We can defend hand-to-hand only. You know as well as I that they'll simply starve us out if we don't… take action. I had to do this, Sire." Reluctantly, Jinkrat used the older man's title of honor. After all that had happened, with the death of his son during the battle for Kobol, with the years and years of suffering and hopelessness, Jinkrat's respect for the ruling order had fled. But, this man seemed to be their only hope. He'd promised much… perhaps, with the extra insurance of the bomb, and some luck, Jinkrat's people would survive. Perhaps they would all survive.

Aron drew a breath; the sound wasn't quite a gasp. "The bomb," he said, shaking his head. "What… where have you planted it?"

"I cannot say," Jinkrat said. "You must understand—when Athena returns, they'll immediately begin searching. And if you know of its location—well, their tactics are well-known." Jinkrat meant torture. He was absolutely convinced that Apollo would go to any lengths to get what he wanted. He had already starved thousands, and even taken the air from that barge, and the lives of its crew and all the people.

"Oh!" Aron said, very surprised. "Yes, I see. I understand."

"But there is hope," Aron said.

"Hope," Jinkrat said. "A word I have almost forgotten."

"The Council has ordered all Vipers grounded, and food, fuel, healers and medicine sent to you on the *Rising Star*. You should have—"

"Praise the Lords of Kobol!" Jinkrat cried.

"Yes!" Aron said enthusiastically. "We must work together. Perhaps a cease-fire is the next step."

Jinkrat looked at the Council member. "No," he said. "Not yet. We have no food yet, and have seen nothing of this fuel you promise. After it is delivered, then—"

"I understand," Aron said. "You have suffered much."

Jinkrat thought of his son, burning with fever, dying in his arms. "I have suffered beyond telling," he said.

"I… I know," Aron said.

"So, let us both pray that we receive the supplies as promised. I do not trust Apollo," Jinkrat said. "He may renege. He may not… Aron, my son comes to the *Galactica*. I want your word as a… as a friend, that you will watch over him."

"You have my word of honor, by the Lords of Kobol," Aron said. "Farewell." And then he broke the communication.

Jinkrat took a deep breath and held it. And prayed that it would all come true.

Praying was hard for Jinkrat. He prayed that Koren would be safe and he had judged right. Jinkrat was grief-stricken father. He'd never touched a rifle or a laser pistol until the last battle before their descent into this horrible place. He'd never thought he'd ever kill a man, either in battle or in anger. Now he had done both. A man crossed bridges, Jinkrat thought. And he had no control of what the Lords of Kobol had in store for him.

Only he stood between his people and certain death. Even Koren—could Jinkrat save him? Had he sent him, all unknowing, into even worse danger? Even this one remaining son of his, whom he loved more than he loved life itself?

His fate hung on the word of a man he didn't trust; his boy in the hands of strangers. May the Lords of Kobol protect him.

If any harm came to Koren, Jinkrat swore softly to himself, Apollo and the warriors and even his sister Athena would see such rage as no man had ever seen. This, Jinkrat swore to himself. And no man would stand in his way.

Chapter Three

WITH A word and a nod from President Tigh, Apollo at last went to his sanctuary. Tigh was collecting the food, fuel and non-existent medical supplies that had been demanded. It would be a while before anyone realized they had no way to meet the demand; as Tigh assured Apollo, those pellets were small and likely to be very time consuming to gather and package for shipment. And even more time consuming to account. With all the work they'd done to gather the fuel in the first place, that would take time to account for as well.

Athena was on her way back with Cassi and the team, and their captured rebel, a young boy named Koren. And, even stranger, this boy was the son of the chief rebel himself— Jinkrat!

Apollo's thoughts were clouded as he strode down the corridor. Anyone who saw him as he passed would have wondered at the dark expression on his normally clear, calm, reasonable face.

But Athena was already back! As soon as Apollo saw Athena, he knew that something was wrong—really wrong.

"Apollo," she said. Her alarm ran through Apollo like a hot knife.

"What is it?" Apollo asked.

"The rebel, Jinkrat," she said, "he's planted a bomb on the *Galactica*. If we don't meet his demands, he'll detonate it. He says we'll never find it."

"A bomb!" Apollo cried.

Athena nodded. "He's angry, Apollo. He hates us—hates the whole command. We brought his son back, a boy named Koren. But Jinkrat had another child who died. During the last battle for Kobol."

"Fighting?" Apollo asked, feeling a cold chill run through his body.

"Oh, no," Athena said, shaking her head. "Just a child, six yahrens. He had a fever."

"And there was no medical help," Apollo said, understanding immediately.

"He blames us," Athena said. "He's filled with rage."

"And so he's willing to destroy the whole fleet to get revenge," Apollo said.

Athena looked at Apollo, biting her lip. "I don't know, Apollo. There's so much anger in him, I couldn't read him. I honestly don't know."

"Do you think this bomb is a ruse?" Apollo asked.

"No!" Athena said, eyes widening. "It's real. I felt that in him. He's willing to go to any extent to get what he wants. He truly believes that we're holding back everything from the refugees on the *Rising Star* and the rest of the fleet. Food, fuel, medicine—hoarding it for ourselves."

Apollo shook his head. "Athena, the Council thinks the same thing. They blame me for the disaster with the refugees. They, they're…" Apollo couldn't go on. He knew he hadn't done any of those things, but he also had no rational explanation for the disappearance of the fuel; and also couldn't understand how people had begun to starve so quickly when he and Tigh had so carefully rationed out the food they had available.

He couldn't keep turning it over and over in his mind. They'd find out the answers—sooner or later.

Right now, there was a bomb to be found. "Athena, assemble three dozen men from security. Maybe there are some civilians who are familiar with explosives. Start searching the ship. We can't divert any energy to scanning. They'll have to search compartment by compartment. Find that bomb!"

With a brief embrace, Athena left to carry out the search.

After Athena left, Apollo thought about Jinkrat. A man who seemed willing to go to any length to achieve his goals. What would Adama have done? Apollo could picture his father's desperation if it had been Apollo or Athena

who had died, or if one of them had gone off fighting as this man's older son had done, the one who Athena had brought back to the *Galactica*. What would Apollo have done if that had been Boxey? Boxey—now Troy.

But it just didn't make sense. If Jinkrat had been diverting the fuel and food somehow—if he was behind that tragedy—why was he now demanding food through hostages? Why had he planted this bomb as some type of terrorist threat?

Athena had made it clear. The people on the *Rising Star* had gone without food for sectares.

They were starving and desperate, easily manipulated into believing that the warriors were hoarding the food, fuel and medical care that no one had any longer.

"Lords of Kobol, help me now," Apollo said as he entered his quarters. He had to have answers. Athena and Cassi were safe for the moment, Tigh was playing for time, and Starbuck had gotten all the Vipers off safely—at least for the moment.

But they still had only sectares of food, Doctor Salik was overwhelmed, and the fuel reserves could probably be put into an ambrosa glass. And now this bomb!

Apollo could barely think about the search for a way out of the deadly cloud, and the patrol was still lost. Troy—his adopted son—and Boomer and Bojay, dear, longtime friends. And Trays and Dalton.

Apollo thought about what Starbuck must be going through. It was his own daughter out there, missing, but Starbuck was in the cockpit at that very moment, piloting his Viper with the rest of the patrol on Apollo's orders, not flying out in search of Dalton. Because Apollo needed him right where he was.

Apollo knew that it was tearing Starbuck up inside, but Starbuck hadn't said a thing. He'd spoken to Apollo with his eyes, asking the question without words: *When will I get a chance to go after Dalton*?

What if Starbuck went out and came back to find *Galactica* a burnt-out hulk from this rebel bomb? They had to find it—and fast. Thanks to that rebel leader, Jinkrat, everything that was most precious to all of them was hanging by a thin thread. Everything was hanging on those lost Vipers. The only way out: rebuild, restore the fleet, and heal and feed the people in peace and freedom.

Sighing, Apollo tried to clear his mind and focus. Deep in his sanctuary, the lights were dim. It was a perfect place; if only he could stretch his mind out, see deeply, like Adama had done. Apollo thought for a moment, trying to untangle the threads: Aron—the Council full of suspicion and mistrust, the mysterious Jinkrat. And a sudden picture of Baltar sitting under house arrest, offering no new insights or help of any kind.

But nothing came to him. Then he heard the slightest sound, and turned, hand on his pistol. Someone was there!

"Who is it?" he called, ready to fire.

"Friend," came a deep, rough voice. "I have been waiting for you."

"Gar'Tokk!" Apollo cried.

Out of the shadows stepped the tall, bearded Borellian Noman, throwing back his long, rough cloak.

Gar'Tokk was well—Apollo could see that for himself, and as usual, he revealed nothing of his mood or intentions in any way, staring impassively at Apollo.

"I was hoping for some time to meditate," Apollo told the Noman.

"I see," Gar'Tokk replied. Talkative as usual, Apollo thought. Now that he knew who the intruder was, Apollo's alarm faded.

Gar'Tokk would never be rushed. Apollo waited.

"I desired to speak with you," Gar'Tokk went on.

"I gathered that," Apollo responded cautiously.

The Noman threw back his hood, staring hard at Apollo. Neither spoke or moved for microns, Apollo not breaking from Gar'Tokk's intimidating gaze.

"There is something I must say," Gar'Tokk said at last.

"And I must also say something," Apollo told him. "I am grateful for all that you did. You saved all of us. And I am thankful that you live, and are well."

It was Gar'Tokk who looked away first.

"I am free from my bond to you," Gar'Tokk said.

Apollo thought that the Noman was taking his leave. Apollo wasn't sure how he felt. It was hard to talk to any Noman, but even with their uneasy friendship, Gar'Tokk was the hardest of any Apollo had ever known. Why had he picked now, of all times? Apollo had so much to handle; this rebellion—who knew what lay in store? But Apollo owed him so much. He had been through so much with Gar'Tokk.

"I am free from my bond," Gar'Tokk said once more, but this time very softly, looking down at his rough, warrior's hands. Then he looked back up and once again met Apollo's eyes with his piercing gaze. "I came to tell you that though my bond is broken, and I may go where I wish, I wish to remain here." And Gar'Tokk paused again, straightening his shoulders. "By your side," he added.

Now it was Apollo's turn to be speechless for microns. "I am grateful, Gar'Tokk." Then he held out his hand. After a moment, Gar'Tokk took Apollo's hand in his and bore down with his vice-like grip.

"I name you friend," Gar'Tokk said. "You are a man of honor, as am I."

Apollo was moved beyond any words he could say. He nodded, and Gar'Tokk returned the gesture. Then he released Gar'Tokk's hand.

"GarTokk," Apollo said. "You spoke of honor."

The Noman nodded.

"I've had to make choices that I don't think have anything to do with honor. I'm bound to defend the life of every man, woman and child on this fleet, but I've had to choose some lives over others. There have been…"

"That is not dishonorable," GarTokk said. "A man does what he must."

Then, as silently as GarTokk had emerged from the shadows, he retreated.

"GarTokk!" Apollo called, but the Noman was gone, leaving Apollo alone with his turbulent thoughts.

"I guess we should be grateful that we can still talk to each other," Boomer sent to Troy over the comm. It had been far too long since they'd had contact with the *Galactica*, but the five pilots had decided to continue searching for a way out of the star cloud instead of returning. These clouds interfered with communications like crazy, and they were so thick it was like flying through soup. Potentially deadly soup, Boomer thought, because there were astrolons and hazards that popped up out of nowhere. More squads were sure to follow, and they'd eventually hear their chatter over the comm. That had been Boomer's theory, anyway.

But after all that time, Boomer was getting worried, and they were all exhausted, nerves on edge. They hadn't found a sign of any break in the cloud. By Boomer's coordinates, they'd gotten farther than anyone else had so far; maybe if they pushed on a little farther they could…

"As rough as it is out here, we're doing pretty good," Troy replied. "I'm getting pretty sick of dodging astrolons, though."

Boomer chuckled. He was getting sick of it, too.

"We're low on fuel," Trays told Boomer. "Maybe you can figure out something," he snapped to Bojay.

"Maybe you should try," Bojay snapped back.

"You're the ace. I thought you could fly on your own power."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Trays demanded.

"Now, wait a micron," Boomer said.

"A guy as full of hot air as you oughta be able to cruise for parsecs," Bojay said, chuckling.

"Shut up, you two," Boomer replied. "What are you seeing up ahead?" he asked Troy and Dalton. The lead paired Vipers were only ten thousand metrons ahead, but in the star cloud, they might as well have been a parsec distant.

"It looks like some kind of a break," Troy said.

"We're low on fuel," Boomer replied. "Advise we turn back. We've seen some breaks in these clouds before, Troy. But there's always more of the same where they came from."

"No," Troy said, pausing a micron. "This looks different. There's a real change. I can feel it."

"How's that?" Trays asked, his voice full of sarcasm.

"We're okay on fuel for now," Dalton chimed in quickly before Troy could respond. "Why don't you two head back? We'll continue on."

"Negative," Boomer said. "We don't split up."

"Hey, we are getting pretty low," Bojay said.

"We're already split up," Dalton replied. "Or can you see us? You—" Her transmission broke for a micron of static. Boomer watched the other three Vipers' signals flicker on his heads-up display.

"We're losing you," Boomer said. Then he whacked his helmet and the signal came in clearly once more.

So much for high technology, he thought.

"Did you use the high-tech approach?" Bojay asked Boomer.

"Yeah, man," Boomer said, smiling to himself.

"Every time you do that, it takes my ear off," Bojay said. "Sure isn't like it used to be."

"No, it isn't," Boomer said. There were years of fighting in his voice, and the knowledge of what Bojay had done over the years to keep the Vipers going.

Seemed like the old days when they could rest and repair were like some kind of wild dream, so far away that Boomer sometimes wondered if they were ever real in the first place.

Boomer's comm crackled again. "Boomer, I think we've got something here," Troy said. "It could be what we've been looking for."

"Fuel's real low," Bojay warned Boomer.

"We want to go ahead," Troy said.

"We don't split up," Boomer said again.

"You should just go back," Trays said, his voice excited. "Even if Bojay there can coast on his own fumes, we're okay on fuel right now."

"Thanks, Trays," Bojay said. "I'll remember that the next time I see a bilgerat and his face reminds me of you."

"Ooooh," Boomer said. "That's gotta hurt." The two old friends laughed quietly together.

"You got a smart mouth for an old man," Trays called back at Bojay.

"That's right," Bojay said in an astonished voice. "I do! They say age makes the wits grow stronger, if not the body. Too bad I left my cane back on the *Galactica*."

"Trays, cut it out," Troy said. Dalton was quiet, as usual, trapped between the two feuding men, not *to* mention Bojay and Boomer.

"This ain't your fight," Trays told Troy.

"We shouldn't be fighting at all," Troy said.

"That's right," Dalton broke in.

Trays's comm cracked. "Bojay, you're getting senile. What do you mean, cane, old man?"

"The cane I've been saving for when I tell you to bend over and stick it where the sun don't shine, Trays," Bojay said.

Boomer could hardly contain his laughter.

"Cut it out, Trays!" Troy cried.

"I didn't say it—you heard him," Trays protested.

"Trays, don't fight with him," Dalton said. "We're the only ones who can find a way out."

Boomer waved over at Bojay in the cockpit beside him. No words were needed between the two old friends. He considered his options the way he always did, and he made his decision.

"We're staying with you," he told Troy, Dalton and Trays.

It didn't matter that the fuel was almost gone. They had to stick together.

"Whoo-hoo!" Troy cried in enthusiasm. "Let's—" and then the comm went out with a huge crackle.

"I don't have anything," Bojay said to Boomer.

"Me neither," Boomer said. They searched on for what seemed like an eternity. Bojay tried everything he could. High-tech and low-tech.

"Frack!" Bojay finally said.

"They're gone," Boomer said. Again, the two pilots looked at each other.

After a while, Bojay said, "We've got to head back, Boom. Our fuel's almost gone."

"I know, man," Boomer said.

Together, they turned back to the *Galactica*, hearts heavy.

"Well, maybe they'll have some warm rations saved up," Bojay said after a while.

"I don't think there are any left, buddy," Boomer replied. He tried to cover the worry he felt with a laugh. "If there's a way out, they'll find it," he told Bojay.

"Yeah," Bojay said. "They will. Unless that fracking idiot Trays does something."

"That's enough joking," Boomer said. "They're okay, even if we did lose them. It's up to them now."

"Yeah," Bojay said, sighing. "I guess you're right. And it's no joke about the fuel anymore, Boom. We're on real fumes right now."

"Well, let's just take it easy," Boomer said.

"Like a couple of old guys," Bojay replied.

"Don't you put me there yet—you and your cane!" Boomer said, laughing as much in remorse as in humor.

"I don't have a cane," Bojay said after a micron.

"I know you don't," Boomer said. "Where'd you…"

"I just wish I had one to give Trays a crack with it! Right up his—"

"Bojay!" Boomer cried, cutting his friend off.

"What?" Bojay demanded.

"Three o'clock, over there," Boomer said.

Bojay's head snapped around. "What's that?" he asked.

"It looks like—couldn't be," Boomer said in a soft voice.

They had both seen the flash of a silver crescent in the cloudy mass of the *Ur* cloud. But now it was gone. Pondering the strange sight, Boomer and Bojay were on their way back to the *Galactica*. Boomer could only hope and pray to the Lords of Kobol that Dalton, Troy and hothead Trays would find the way that they were all so desperately seeking. And, he thought darkly, that their friends back on the *Galactica* were all right as well.

In his meditation, Apollo found few clear answers. But he thought of the captured boy from the *Rising Star*—Jinkrat's son Koren. The boy was in sickbay being tended by Cassiopeia. So, after a few more moments in his sanctuary, Apollo decided that he should spare some microns to speak with the boy.

When Apollo reached sickbay, he found Cassiopeia sitting by the pale child, holding his hand and laughing. Cassiopeia looked up at Apollo and her whole manner changed in an instant. A cloud came over her wide blue eyes. She looked for a moment like she had something important to tell Apollo, but then she seemed to change her mind, and she glanced quickly away.

Apollo put his hand on Cassi's shoulder and smiled at the bedridden boy.

"I hear you are very brave," Apollo said.

The boy didn't speak, but he nodded, his eyes serious.

"Athena told me that your name was Koren," Apollo said. He waited for the boy to reply.

"I'm Koren," the boy said. "And I know who you are," he said to Apollo, his young voice full of anger and confusion.

"I'm sorry you were hurt," Apollo said. "Athena went to the *Rising Star* to speak with your father. She brought Cassi to help."

"I know," Koren said, looking up at Cassi. "My Dad trusted Cassi, but that doesn't change things."

"What things, Koren?" Apollo asked.

"I guess you kill so many people, you don't even know," Koren said.

Shocked, Apollo sprang back.

Cassi gave Apollo a warning look, but he didn't understand what she was trying to get across.

"What are you talking about, Koren?" Apollo asked. "I've killed a lot of…" Apollo was about to say "Cylons" when Koren interrupted.

"You killed my brother!" Koren cried, struggling to free himself from Cassi's arms. Cassi held tight. Apollo saw that she was murmuring things to the boy and stroking his hair, trying to calm him.

"Koren, I don't know your brother. I've never—"

"He died!" Koren cried. "I was right there. He was all covered in sweat and he had a big fever. We didn't have good water to give him. There wasn't no healers," he said, looking up at Cassi before he turned back to Apollo, his brown eyes blazing.

"When did he die?" Apollo asked in a gentle voice.

Koren's eyes narrowed. "In that battle with the Cylons. We was calling for help but somebody said, there's no help now for anybody by the order of Commander Apollo."

"I never ordered that," Apollo said, his eyes wide.

Cassi interrupted, looking up at Apollo. "Yes, you did," she said. "We have been under such orders since Kobol," Cassi said. "There aren't enough of us to go around—you see what sickbay's like," she added.

Apollo surveyed the scene, registering the chaos for the first time. He'd grown so accustomed to it that he hadn't even thought about it when he went to see the boy. There were groaning patients on every bed and even emergency gurneys. Some were settled in chairs that seemed better than

others. The other medtechs were rushing around; angry, hurt, and sick voices cried out.

There was a big difference between making that choice, and seeing the results, Apollo thought. His heart shrank.

Apollo took a deep breath. He turned to Koren. "I had no choice," he said.

"I don't understand," Koren said. "He was only six yahrens. He was my best friend." Koren's eyes filled with tears. "And he just took a deep breath and then he died!"

"I'm so sorry," Apollo said. He thought he should touch the boy, comfort him somehow, but he didn't know what to do or how to do it.

"He just died," Koren said, now sobbing.

Impulsively, Apollo took the boy's hand. "Listen, Koren," Apollo said. "I—we—none of us wanted anybody to die. Not your brother, not anybody else. But we were in the middle of the battle and we didn't have enough doctors or healers like Cassi to treat the people who were wounded. It also wasn't safe for people to go from ship to ship. If we took a chance like that, we could lose the healers we have."

Sniffing, Koren looked up at Apollo. "We prayed for a healer," he said. "But nobody came."

"I'm sorry," Apollo said, feeling the regret deep in his heart. "That must have been horrible for your father. And for you."

"He needs his rest," Cassi said, looking up at Apollo.

Apollo nodded. "Koren, I know you need to rest, but I'd like to ask you some questions."

"My dad says you don't care about anybody but yourself," Koren replied.

"Apollo does," Cassi said, squeezing Koren's hand.

"You trust me, don't you, Koren?"

The boy nodded.

"Apollo would never do anything wrong," Cassi continued, looking up at Apollo again. Apollo felt the irony of the statement, although there was no irony in Cassi's voice. He had the feeling once more that there was something that Cassi wanted to say to him—something that she was holding back. She looked back down at the injured boy and stroked his forehead gently. "You should tell Apollo the truth. He's my friend, and he's your friend, too."

"Okay," Koren said, his voice full of uncertainty and his face darkened by fear.

Apollo's heart went out to the child. He was so young. Lords of Kobol, these were the people Apollo was sworn to defend and protect!

"Koren," Apollo said, making his voice as gentle as possible, "What does your father say? Why is he rebelling against the *Galactica*? And why, Koren, why would he plant a bomb?"

"He just wants food and medicine," Koren said. "Doctors. He doesn't want anybody else to die."

"But if that bomb goes off, a lot of innocent people will die," Apollo said.

Koren grimaced. "He doesn't want that. He just doesn't trust you, because of…"

"Your brother dying?" Apollo asked.

Koren nodded. Then his face hardened. "My dad says that you highborn people don't care nothing about anybody else."

"I do care," Apollo said.

"My dad's got a lot of men, and guns! A ship came with them," Koren said, crossing his arms. "You can't beat us."

Apollo watched the boy move his lips as he figured silently. He seemed very bright, but without much education. What had the fleet come to?

"Two hundred guns!" Koren said.

"That's a lot," Apollo said.

So, they were short on food; none of the food that Apollo had ordered to be given to them had gotten there. And missing fuel, too—but there were guns?

"What does your father intend to do with these guns?"

Koren shrugged. "He gave some away and put the others someplace. He doesn't like guns," he added.

"He doesn't?" Apollo was amazed. The rebel leader who could terrorize with a bomb, but who didn't like guns?

"No," Koren said. "He says we need food and medicine, not guns. But he also said," and Koren looked hard at Apollo, "that if we don't get it, we'll have to do whatever's necessary." The little warlike face glared up at Apollo.

Apollo nodded. "I've heard this type of thinking before," he said. Everything was filtered through the loving eyes of this rebel's son.

"I was fighting!" Koren said proudly. "I'm not afraid of you."

. "I know," Apollo said. Athena had told him of the boy's boldness, and also told him how Jinkrat hadn't approved of Koren's military adventure.

"The others ran away. They won't the next time," Koren said.

"But you stayed," Apollo said. "That means you are brave."

Suddenly Koren grinned. "You think so?" he asked. As tough as he was, he was still a child.

Apollo nodded. "Yes, I know so," he told the boy. Koren suddenly shuddered in pain and his face grew pale.

"He needs to rest now," Cassi said. "There'll be time for more questions later."

Cassi was right, Apollo realized. The boy could barely keep his eyes open. It was understandable, after being wounded, and going without food and probably decent rest the way he had.

"You're right," Apollo told Cassi. "Rest and be strong," he told Koren, putting his hand briefly on the boy's shoulder and smiling down at him. "That way you'll be at full strength to return to your father. Don't worry, Koren. Everything will work out."

Apollo said a silent prayer in the hope that he spoke the truth.

"Just sleep now," Cassi said. Both she and Apollo could see that Koren was past hearing them. His eyes were shut and his thin, pale face was relaxed in a child's contented sleep.

Apollo smiled at Cassi. "You always had a gift with children,'" he told her.

But instead of smiling back, she turned away.

Apollo couldn't dream of what was the matter with Cassi. She was always cheerful; nothing seemed to bother her.

"We need to talk," she said, turning back to him.

There was no doubt that something was really wrong now.

"All right," Apollo said, and for some reason that he didn't understand, his heart began to pound.

"Let's go outside," Cassi said. "I don't want to disturb him," she said looking back at the sleeping Koren.

Apollo reached for Cassi's hand, but she drew away, walking in front of him, her shoulders stiff, as if she carried a heavy, but invisible burden beneath her medtech uniform.

"Do you want to go somewhere?" Apollo asked her, thinking that maybe a few moments of the little refreshment they still had available would be welcome.

"No!" she said sharply.

"Cassi, what's the matter?" Apollo asked. He'd never seen her like this.

"I know that…" she started to say. She paused a micron and looked up at him, brushing her soft golden hair from her eyes. Apollo saw that they were damp and wide with emotion. "I know that everything's falling apart right now," she went on. "And you don't need more on your shoulders, but I've got to…"

"Got to what, Cassi?" Apollo asked.

Was it something with Starbuck? Something with Starbuck and Athena—that was it. Or the boy, Koren? Had he said something else to her? Cassi knew something and was torn to pieces over it. He put his hand on Cassi's shoulder, and almost couldn't believe it when she touched his hand and moved it gently away.

"There's no other way for me to say it," she said.

As much as he liked Cassi, Apollo was at his wit's end with this strange conversation. "It"—what was it?

"I'm pregnant, Apollo," she said.

Immediately, he looked down at her stomach, but it was perfectly slender and flat, as far as he could see.

He mentally thrashed himself—women like Cassi probably kept their figures a long time when they were pregnant. Who knew how far she was along?

"Cassi," he said, starting to stammer. And who could be the father? Starbuck and Cassi had finally parted after so many years. Now Starbuck

was getting closer to Athena, but if he somehow had done it—Apollo's temper flared again. "If Starbuck…" he started to say.

"No," she said, holding up her hand and fighting back tears. "No, Apollo. I'm going to have your baby."

"If Starbuck…" Apollo repeated. The corridor seemed to spin around as her words finally sank in.

"My baby?" he said.

Cassi nodded. "That night we were together," she said softly.

"It wasn't…" Apollo said. And immediately wished he could have laser-sealed his lips together. The truth was, he couldn't remember doing anything with Cassi. But she obviously thought that he had.

Cassi's eyes widened. "I haven't been with anyone else in yahrens," she said. "It's you and only you, Apollo." She looked down at her flat stomach and Apollo wished that he could,— have fallen through the floor.

"Cassi," he said, holding out his hand awkwardly to her.

She looked back at him, eyes blazing and face filled with pride.

"I guess I'm just… surprised," he said. "I need some time. This is all so… unexpected." Apollo—how could you sound like such a fool? But he didn't remember a thing. They had both had too much to drink. Apollo's head was spinning. Cassi was going to have a baby. And he—Apollo—was the father!

"I understand," Cassi said quietly. "I care about you, Apollo. I've done a lot of thinking. This child needs two loving parents. Even though I don't know if we'll make it out of here or not, I think that I could… have feelings for you," she said softly.

"I care about you too," Apollo blurted. "But I just need some time to think." Suddenly, Apollo felt more awkward and immature than the boy who lay on the bed in sickbay.

"It's okay," Cassi said. "I don't expect you to say anything right away." She tried to smile bravely at him, but there wasn't much joy in her face.

All at once, Apollo could only think of getting away. He had to somehow work this out in his mind. In just a few words, Cassi had swept all the troubles of the *Galactica* from his mind, even the bomb search, and all he could think of was that simple phrase: "I'm going to have a baby. Your baby."

Now, he was going to be a father—a real one this time.

"I need some time to think," he repeated. He found himself retreating down the corridor. Cassi took a few steps after him, then she seemed to realize that there wasn't anything more she could say, and nothing else for her to do but wait. He hoped that she didn't hate him. How did he know what she felt? He didn't know anything, and it was like the whole world had suddenly turned upside down. He had the burden of the whole fleet on his shoulders —and now a baby!

He had to talk this over with someone. Suddenly he had a glimpse of Starbuck's feelings toward his daughter Dalton. Cassi's feelings. Of course Apollo loved Boxey—now all grown up and called Troy—but it just wasn't the same. Cassi—pregnant! And with Apollo's baby!

Who could Apollo turn to? Someone who cared, and who'd listen without judging.

As he stumbled away from Cassi and the sick bay, it came to him. Sheba. She'd understand. She'd know what was best, and even tell him how he could talk to Cassi. Apollo set out in search of Sheba, hoping that she wasn't out with the other Vipers on patrol. Maybe, Lords of Kobol willing, Sheba would be on rest cycle. And Apollo could find her.

Sheba had just returned from patrol, searching for the lost Vipers. Apollo met her in the corridor near the launch bay.

He walked along beside her without saying much at first. Soon, they reached Sheba's quarters.

Sheba seemed subdued, but didn't act surprised when Apollo told her Cassiopeia's news.

"What are you going to do?" she asked Apollo, her slender, lovely face almost without expression.

"I don't know, Sheba," Apollo said. And that was the truth.

"Well," Sheba said quietly. "You know what your duty is. You have other concerns now as well, Apollo."

"I've had enough of duty!" Apollo cried. He immediately regretted it.

"That's a choice you made a long time ago," Sheba said, putting her hand on his.

Apollo thought that he detected tension in her voice, but he decided it was just because Sheba was anxious for him.

"I mean, I have feelings for Cassi. But I'm just not sure," Apollo continued.

"What kind of feelings?" Sheba asked. "Duty? You like her?"

"Yes, I like her," Apollo replied. "Maybe, maybe more than like. I just never thought that anything could develop. I mean, since Serina…"

"Since Serina," Sheba said in a low, angry tone, and Apollo couldn't mistake the expression on her face then for friendly concern and support. Sheba was acting angry—and jealous. Jealous of both Serina and Cassi.

He almost slapped his forehead, he was so angry at himself. How could he have taken it for granted that Sheba was just his friend? She wasn't acting like "just a friend." Not at all.

"Sheba, you're one of my closest friends," Apollo said. "I thought…"

"What did you think?" Sheba said, still keeping her voice low, but it dripped with anger all the same. "Did you think the same way as you did that night, when you slept with Cassi?"

Apollo felt himself sinking down into a black hole—a bottomless pit from which he could never escape.

First Cassi, now Sheba. He was having the worst sectare of his life. Why, with all the disaster the *Galactica* was facing, was he putting his foot in his mouth? Over and over again.

"I just don't know what to do," Apollo said. Sheba's face softened. Well, maybe he was doing a little better, he told himself.

"I guess I can understand," Sheba said. "You weren't expecting this."

Apollo shook his head.

Sheba turned away for a moment, and Apollo saw her run her hand through her long, silky hair. She threw her head back and sighed, then turned back.

"I wasn't expecting that my father would have to ram the *Pegasus* into that basestar," she said. "I'm not the right person for you to ask, Apollo," she said. And her voice wasn't angry any more, but it was still full of emotion.

"I'm sorry," Apollo told her. "I should have realized."

"And so should I," Sheba said. "I'm not the person for you to ask, Apollo. I can never be." And there were tears in her wide eyes—those warrior eyes that had seen so many battles and so much blood spilled, even to that of her father's blood, Commander Cain.

"Sheba."

"I don't know anything about babies, Apollo," she added as she stood to leave, fighting back the tears. "You won't ever hear about something like that from me. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got a Viper to pilot." And with that, Sheba left, leaving Apollo alone in her own quarters with his confusion and doubt, feeling like something Boxey's daggit would have chewed on during the old sectares.

The old sectares. Well, there was no going back now, not for Cassi, not for Sheba, not for Starbuck, and especially not for Apollo.

He thought about following Sheba, but he knew from long experience that there was nothing he could say to her. And once again, wondered how he could be such a damned fool.

Everything could change in a micron! Cassi's baby—Sheba had spoken of duty. Apollo didn't know if he could save a single person in the fleet any longer, least of all this tiny new life.

Apollo forced himself to leave. There'd been enough reflection and talk. All he could do was turn this trouble over to the Lords of Kobol. Right now, everybody else needed him, and his own troubles would have to wait.

Suddenly, he realized what he had to do. The boy, Koren—he'd said that a ship had arrived carrying weapons for the rebels. And there was only one place that ship could have come from: the *Galactica* itself.

Felgercarb! They had to find out who the spy was on *Galactica*. Jinkrat couldn't have done all of that on his own. Apollo ran for the bridge.

President Tigh's face was bright with one of his rare, genuine smiles. "I have the best news of all for you, Apollo," he said with true pleasure.

"What?" Apollo said, almost laughing along with Tigh's clear enjoyment.

"We have detected a transport barge—and it seems to be carrying some… interesting cargo."

"What?" Apollo asked.

"A great deal of excess fuel, and… food."

"That's where the fuel went! Whose barge is—"

"It's one of ours," Tigh said, shaking his head. "Believe me, we gave no such orders. It's rogue."

"Launch Vipers. Bring that ship back with an escort!" Apollo commanded.

Now they'd find all the answers. That crew could be questioned, and the fuel and food retrieved. Thank the Lords of Kobol!

"Sheba's already on it," Tigh said.

"Fantastic!" Apollo said, his heart filling with hope again. "We're not finished yet," he told Tigh, clapping him on the shoulder, grinning. "Inform me as soon as Sheba's patrol arrives from Battlestar Galactica its escort duty. I want to speak with that crew before we go to the Council and let them know the truth."

"My pleasure," Tigh said. And from the set of his strong jaw, Apollo could tell that Tigh really meant it.

Striding down the hall near the launch bay, it was a different scene. For once, Starbuck didn't have much to say. Athena, matching his strides easily, struggled to keep up some kind of conversation with much less ease. She had stayed on *Galactica* for a few centons. And she wanted to talk to Starbuck.

"This is the first good news we've had in a while," Athena said, smiling. "It could even give us the lead we need to find those explosives. That'll put a stop to this rebellion."

"Yeah," Starbuck said, his face turned away.

Athena didn't have to see Starbuck's face to know what kind of expression was on it.

"This will put a stop to everything," she said. "So much for those rebels."

"Yeah," Starbuck said again.

Athena waited, counting to ten, then she tried one more time to get more than a single syllable out of Starbuck.

"You're worried about Dalton, aren't you?" she said.

"Yeah," Starbuck said. Microns passed. She heard him breathing.

"She's a big girl, Starbuck," Athena said. "She can take care of herself." She held her breath, bracing herself for another depressed-sounding "Yeah."

"I know, Athena," Starbuck said quietly. Once again, she wondered about the complex personality that lay beneath Starbuck's thick head of hair. She knew that he wanted to shoot his Viper off into the *Ur* cloud in search of Dalton, and she also knew that something held him back. She wasn't quite sure what that something was. She couldn't believe that it was she. Not yet, at any rate. There were sparks between the two of them—real and bright ones—but underneath Starbuck's roguish outside, he was a solid, caring father on the inside. Something about Dalton, being her father, taking on that responsibility, had deepened Starbuck. Or maybe it was just everything they'd been through together. Maybe it was dying and coming back to life—Starbuck wouldn't talk about that.

He was still a hothead, he still drank too much, and those crazy schemes of his still came up all the time, but there was something more to him, too. The old Starbuck would have given up everything to chase Dalton's exhaust trail through the star cloud, and if anyone could find Dalton by instinct, Starbuck could.

But this wasn't the old Starbuck.

Starbuck's experience with whatever lay beyond, and the Light Beings had changed him. The last battles had changed everyone. They had even, Athena thought, changed her. So many had lost their lives, Commander Cain, so many others. And now, well, even Athena was beginning to wonder if they'd find a way out.

"Apollo needs me," Starbuck said suddenly.

Now it was Athena's turn to be tongue-tied. Finally, she said, "I guess you're right, Starbuck."

"I can't just take off with those wolves at his back. You weren't there, Athena. You didn't see that Council. Apollo couldn't say anything. These rebels are out of control. It doesn't look good, Athena. It looks like it is Apollo's fault."

"But everything's all right now," Athena said. "There won't be any more disasters. We've got the missing food and fuel—we're escorting it back to

the *Galactica*."

"Yeah," Starbuck said again. "I guess you're right."

But there wasn't much conviction in his voice.

"Starbuck, what do you mean, I wasn't there?"

"Athena," Starbuck said, his voice growing passionate, more like the old Starbuck that she knew. "They were like—I don't know. They don't trust Apollo."

"Apollo says everything will be all right," Athena said.

"I'm not sure this is going to help, is all I'm saying," Starbuck said.

"Look, let Apollo deal with the politics. I saw the rebel Jinkrat with my own eyes. He's not crazy, Starbuck. You can deal with the…"

"Yeah," Starbuck said, interrupting her. "You're right. I don't know what I'm talking about. I guess my mind is just on other things."

Other things, like Dalton missing. This time, Athena didn't say any more, and as they strode down the gleaming corridors of the *Galactica*, Athena thought that this, her original battlestar, had never looked so bright, nor so beautiful.

"The Rebellion can be stopped," Apollo told a stunned Council.

"Apollo!" Sire Aron cried. "What has happened?"

"There are still issues—the rebel commander issued a bomb threat for the *Galactica*, and we have been unable to locate any device aboard Battlestar—but we have intercepted a transport barge," Apollo said. "It contains the missing food and fuel."

"Praise the Lords!" cried one of the council members.

"Yes," Aron said. "I am thrilled that you found this. Tell us, who launched this barge? Where was it heading?"

Apollo cleared his throat. "It was from *Galactica*," he said.

"*Galactica*!" Aron said, astonished. "But—"

"We will be questioning the crew. Tigh and I believe that the source of all of the trouble are… elements… here that are working with the rebel leader. Probably they—"

"What do you mean, elements?" Aron asked.

"Well, it was one of our own ships," Apollo said. "Now that we've—"

"Apollo," Aron said, his brow creased with worry. "What are you saying? That Colonial Warriors themselves took this food and fuel? That they were responsible?"

Again, the council chamber exploded with murmurings and questions.

Aron held up his hands to quiet the group. "This is very serious!" he said.

"I agree," Apollo said. "But surely, once we question—"

"Apollo," Aron said, looking extremely concerned. "Surely you must realize how this appears to us. You come here to tell us the rebellion is stopped. It's all very… convenient."

"But we've—" Apollo said.

"Yes!" cried another council member. "It is convenient, Apollo. If you were hiding that fuel for your own use, and the food, it would be easy to just 'discover' it like this."

"Tigh discovered the traces and the unauthorized launch. I assure you that —"

"We must await the questioning of this crew. But I'm afraid that it should be done under Council auspices, Apollo."

"Sheba is—"

"We have no lack of trust for Sheba," Council Member Aron said. His words hung in the air for microns.

"In addition," Aron continued, "We ordered that all Vipers be grounded. So in that case, we must also ask—why was Sheba's patrol out there at all?"

All Apollo could do was stare.

With heavy feet, Apollo left the Council Chamber. As soon as he was in the corridor, he reached his cabin, he felt the tracking alarm vibrating in his tunic pocket. Baltar! The old villain was on the loose. With everything breaking loose, Apollo couldn't believe it. Silently cursing Baltar, Apollo checked the display to find Baltar's glowing red signal moving through Beta Deck. It looked like Baltar was heading for… the Forward Bar. Not that anybody was in the bar, but Apollo wasn't sure that Baltar would care about that.

Apollo quickly warned Tigh and Athena that Baltar was on the loose; surely his ankle would be burning from the tracking device. As far as he'd gotten from his house-arrest quarters, he had to be in agony!

Despite his exhaustion, Apollo sprinted to Beta Deck. Once he entered the darkened lounge, he squinted as his eyes adjusted to the change in lighting, and to his disgust, saw Baltar relaxing in a booth.

"Why did you leave your quarters?" Apollo demanded as he steamed up to the booth. Lazily, Baltar barely acknowledged Apollo. He had a greenish, poisonous-looking drink in his hand. Where had he come up with *that*?

"Oh, Apollo, always such a stickler," Baltar said. He was trying to capture some of his old nastiness, but it wasn't working. Apollo saw right through his bravado. Baltar was getting old, Apollo realized. Even though Baltar was of the same blood as Adama, a son of Kobol, the yahrens had not been kind to him. Where Adama had never bowed to age, remaining strong and vigorous all his yahrens, there was a weakness in Baltar's movements, an uncertainty that might not have been the result of old age alone. Perhaps the weakness also came from inside of Baltar's soul. A lot of the old fury and

vigor had left the once-tireless villain. And try as he might to hate Baltar, to hurl insults at him, Apollo couldn't.

"Sit down, Apollo. Have a drink with me," Baltar said, smiling his nasty smile that always reminded Apollo of a large, cruel feline after a satisfying meal.

"I think I'll pass," Apollo said. He didn't want to know where Baltar had found that contraband liquor. "You never answered. What are you doing out of your quarters?" Apollo glanced at Baltar's crossed legs. The tracking device was glowing like a Cylon's eye! Yet Baltar showed no reaction to the pain.

"Been a long time since I've had a drink," Baltar looked around the empty bar with his dark, veiled eyes.

"So you thought you'd just walk down here. You could have had that in your quarters. I took responsibility for you, Baltar! Is this how you repay me?" Apollo said, guarding his expression carefully.

Apollo knew the care that he had to take. Baltar had sight into men, even a man as strong-minded as Apollo. He gave commands with his mind as easily as he breathed, and the weak-minded and unwary were ever his prey. Not that Apollo was either weak-minded or unwary, and he wasn't even slightly afraid of Baltar, but he didn't want to give Baltar even a glimpse of a chink where he might worm his way into Apollo's mind.

"What's a deck or two, more or less?" Baltar, said chuckling. Apollo could not believe that he'd actually trusted Baltar to the point where he believed he'd stay under house arrest and obey the warnings from the tracking device strapped around his gnarled old ankle.

Baltar cleared his throat, then spoke again. "So it seems once again that the Council causes trouble for the family of Adama," he said.

"So it seems," Apollo said.

"I wonder," Baltar said, leaning conspiratorially across the table, "if they might want to reinstate an old member fallen on hard times."

"I doubt that," Apollo said, chuckling.

A lightning flash of Baltar's imperious temper blazed across his face. His brows darkened and his eyes glittered dangerously. "Don't doubt me, Apollo. Never make that mistake."

"No," Apollo said. "I don't doubt you, Baltar. But you've officially gone insane if you think the Council would ever agree to let you back again."

"Once they were proud to have me," Baltar said, staring into his drink. "I don't suppose you believe that, do you?" he asked Apollo, a belligerent and self-pitying tone in his deep voice.

"You weren't always evil, Baltar," Apollo said.

Baltar didn't respond for microns. He took a sip of his drink, then gulped half of it down at once. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he replied, "There's no such thing as evil or good, young Apollo. That's something your fool of a father believed in, not me. There are only… choices."

Apollo was speechless.

Finally, he said, "No good man would ever make the choices you've made, Baltar."

"And no good man," Baltar growled, "would ever have lived my life or seen the things I've seen. I've known freedom, Apollo. Real freedom."

"You were prisoner to the Cylons for yahrens," Apollo said. "That's not what I'd call freedom."

"I don't mean that," Baltar said. "I mean now. Look at me—I'm a free man!" Baltar smiled his crooked smile that really wasn't much of a smile at all. Apollo had never seen a smile quite like it. Baltar's eyes glittered like cruel black stars while his teeth shone brightly.

"You're my prisoner, Baltar. Do you want me to call Tigh and have him escort you back to the brig in chains?" Apollo asked. "You were supposed

to help, not wander off to the empty bar for a stolen drink! Lords of Kobol —the rebels have got a bomb on the *Galactica*."

"Choices," Baltar said obstinately. "There are always choices."

"I don't think that's why you ran off," he said after a micron. "Just what were you looking for? You can't escape from the *Galactica* —and I know you, Baltar. You're not enduring that tracking bracelet's punishment just to have a drink."

"No," Baltar said. "That's not why. You wanted me to help you. I escaped in order to help."

Apollo nearly choked on his ambrosa. "In the bar that's been closed for centares?"

"Funny, is it? I watched the Council's pronouncements, and I've done some thinking about this rebel, Jinkrat. This is a dangerous situation, Apollo."

"We're well in control of that," Apollo said.

"Well, yes," Baltar said, clearing his throat. "Perhaps. But tell me, have you found that bomb? Have those missing Vipers come back? With the boy—Boxey—I hear he goes by Troy now. And who else—that stubborn pilot Boomer?"

"No, we haven't found any of it yet," Apollo said.

"Out there searching," Baltar said, his eyes growing hazy and vague. "Out in that *Ur* cloud," he said, waving his hand over the table.

"Get to the point, Baltar," Apollo said.

At once, Baltar's eyes became the sharp, predatory eyes of a hawk, the eyes that Apollo remembered from all the yahrens of war and strife. He gazed at Apollo from under his thick, still-dark brows and said, "There's a hole out there, you know. A way out."

"Where?" Apollo demanded.

Baltar continued staring at Apollo, and then his face broke into that crooked grin once more. And he drained his drink in one final gulp, and then he began to laugh, his terrible, mirthless laugh. "If I knew that, Apollo, I wouldn't be here making small talk with you, would I? Now, I think I'll return to my quarters. And imprisonment."

And with that, Baltar drew his old man's tunic up carefully and left, holding his head high as if he was some kind of uncrowned king.

Suddenly, he paused and turned, no longer smiling. "Oh, Apollo," he said, "I forgot. You find friends and enemies in the strangest places. Those pilots could find the way out in a micron, you know. Just a single, lucky micron."

Apollo's heart leapt. Had Baltar been inside his head? How could he have known what Apollo had been thinking? Did Baltar somehow know that the Vipers were okay? Still searching? All those twists of fate—those lucky and unlucky chances of the last sectare? The very thoughts and words that Apollo had felt himself.

Apollo watched the homing display. It showed that Baltar was heading back to his house-arrest quarters. Even so, it couldn't take away the feeling of dread that Baltar had left in his wake. What had he meant? What did Baltar know that he wasn't telling?

If he was somehow "helping," and was willing to undergo the pain he had just to lead Apollo on that chase to the bar, why wasn't he making any sense? And what was he doing poking around in Apollo's head?

Or even, Apollo wondered, had Baltar been inside his head—or was it just a lucky guess?

Chapter Four

FULL OF unease, Apollo returned to sickbay. The chances were slim that Koren would talk, but maybe he knew something—about the bomb, or the traitors aboard *Galactica*.

Once again, Cassi was in the crowded sickbay, tending the boy, who had made a lot of improvement in a short time.

There had been no time to think. Not after that terrible conversation with Sheba. That had been worse than no help at all. Apollo felt guilty. But his hands had been full—with the council, the betrayals, and the bomb and the rebels.

And of course, to make matters worse, Apollo was responsible for a half-mad wandering Baltar.

"Hey," Apollo said, smiling and touching Cassi's cheek as she stood quietly watching Koren. Apollo realized that he might never see her again. She could be torn away at any micron, things were so unstable.

Koren, now able to walk on his own, refused to say a word to Apollo. He just got up and went to watch some of the other children who were in sickbay who'd gotten a game going in a far corner.

"Hey," Cassi said back. Apollo did feel something.

He was excited, standing near her. Maybe he shouldn't have wasted his time trying to say anything to Koren, but why hadn't he noticed how lovely her hair was before—really noticed? It shone like brushed gold threads. And her face—Cassi was an honest person; she always had been. There was no pretense to her. She didn't pretend to feel things, she felt them. Her emotions were written plainly on her features. Apollo's thoughts turned back to Serina almost before he realized what was happening.

Serina was a great beauty, feminine, but dedicated to her job, with an inner core of pure, hard diamond. There was nothing hard about Cassi, although

she did shine and glitter, Apollo thought. And then he realized, as he watched her gentle expression as she smiled at the children, suddenly free and safe on *Galactica* to be children, did he really know Cassi? She'd been through so much— they all had. Maybe there was a harder, diamond-like part to Cassi that he hadn't discovered.

"Cassi, I was wondering," Apollo said.

"I told you I'd give you all the time you needed," Cassi said. She didn't look up at him, keeping her eyes on Koren and the other children as they played.

"Look!" she said suddenly, pointing at Koren, who was laughing. "He's getting around well. He'll be able to go back in a few sectares."

"What kind of future will he have on the *Rising Star*?"

Apollo asked Cassi. The refugee ship was a nightmare from all he'd heard. He knew there were dozens, even hundreds more like Koren on the ship, but surely there was something that could be done. Koren had a father, though, Apollo reminded himself. A father who cared about him. The rebel —Jinkrat.

"I have friends," Cassi said, winking at him. "They might be willing to look after Koren if his father would accept it."

"Friends?" Apollo asked. As soon he spoke, he wished he hadn't said it. It didn't sound anything like what he meant.

Cassi's eyes flashed. "You think I don't have friends, Apollo? That I'd just sit, lonely, and wait for Starbuck all those yahrens, washing my hair?"

"No, no," Apollo said. "I didn't mean that."

"I'm Gemonese," Cassi said softly. "We make friends for life, and keep them."

"I didn't mean that, Cassi. I just—"

"I know," she said, smiling once more.

"Hey, Koren," Apollo called to the boy. Koren broke away from the other children and limped toward Apollo and Cassi.

"When all this is over, what would you say about going to school on the *Galactica*, maybe living with some friends of Cassi's?"

Koren's eyebrows lowered. He shook his head. "No," he said. "My dad needs me."

"But your father would want the best for you," Cassi said, leaning close to him.

"I know," Koren said. "I'll have time for school later. Right now, my dad needs me."

Then he turned and went back to the other children to play. Apollo stared after him. How bad could Jinkrat be if he inspired this kind of loyalty in his son? A son—Apollo had raised Boxey, but now there was Cassi, and the future, if any of them had one.

"Why don't we, um, go for a walk?" Apollo suggested to Cassi. Why was he so nervous? He'd known Cassi for yahrens. She was the easiest person on the *Galactica* to talk to.

"Where?" Cassi asked.

"There's a place," Apollo said. "As long as we've known each other, I don't think that I've ever told you." There was nothing more to be done on the bridge right now; maybe if he meddled further, he'd make things worse. Apollo was thinking of the Celestial Chamber. He'd spent so many centars there, restoring it and watching the stars through its ancient, beautiful transparent surface. Once there had been three more such domes on *Galactica*, but over the yahrens, only this one, oldest of them, remained. The old astronavigators had used it to check their star paths against the navigational computers. Apollo hadn't been there since they had been trapped in the *Ur* cloud. He wondered what the cloud would look like from up there; whether it would be frightening, or wonderful or illuminating.

"You won't tell me where it is?" Cassi asked.

"No," Apollo said, taking her small, slender hand in his. He smiled, and he could tell from the warmth in her face that she was as eager as he was to get away for a few moments, and glad to be going with him. "It's a surprise."

"Let's go," Cassi said. "It's been a long time since I've had a surprise. Even if you had one recently!"

Apollo laughed one of his rare, true, long laughs. "You're right, Cassi! One turn deserves another, although I don't think this will be so star-shattering."

Athena found Starbuck right outside of Bay Three playing pyramid. She had maybe a centon before she had to get back to the *Daedalus* and maybe she was crazy—she wanted to spend it with Starbuck.

Nobody knew how long things would hold together—literally, considering the bomb. And Athena knew better than anybody how little fuel they really had left. But nobody's problems would matter much longer if they didn't have any air to breathe. When the fuel went, so went the air scrubbers. What happened to Protea's ship is what could happen to everyone.

Starbuck did a double take when he saw her, and she could tell by his face that he was surprised to see her.

"Got you," she said as she approached the group. The other, younger pilots who were playing with Starbuck smiled up at her. They were obviously young cubs, completely ignorant of what they'd gotten themselves into.

"I—I'm sorry, Athena," Starbuck mumbled—it was obvious he'd forgotten all about their plans. He tried, unsuccessfully, to hide his hand from her.

Athena rolled her eyes and shook her head, watching the other players' reactions. One of them immediately threw down two more cubits, and the others soon followed.

"Oh, Starbuck," she said in a downcast tone.

He looked up at her, completely confused. She had seen his hand: he was one card short of a perfect pyramid.

One of the other pilots actually chuckled as he upped his ante one more time with another golden cubit.

Starbuck put his ante in and nodded a single time for just one card.

Athena actually groaned this time.

"Athena!" Starbuck exclaimed. Turning to the others, he said, "She doesn't know a thing about cards, gentlemen. You know these women."

The others laughed and nodded. They laughed even more when Athena punched Starbuck's shoulder, right in the deltoid where she knew it would hurt the most.

Starbuck cried out, and looked up at her, completely astonished and hurt.

" 'These women,'" Athena said under her breath. "You'll pay for that." It was always an adventure with Starbuck. Athena watched eagerly as she watched the others fold their hands. Terrible hands! Starbuck looked up at Athena again, and as the others shook their heads and said, "I'm out," it began to dawn on him what she had done.

"One card short of a perfect pyramid," Starbuck said, throwing down his hand and raking the pile of golden cubits toward him.

"Fracking cards!" one of the young pilots cried. "That's it for me."

"Me too," a second one said. Soon the other three were gone as well.

"Were you trying to spoil my game?" Starbuck asked in a hurt tone.

Athena knelt by Starbuck, gathering up the cards the others had left. She looked at Starbuck, wondering if he'd finally acknowledge that she'd made that sacrifice, staying just to see him.

"I was hoping we could spend some time together," she said, after letting him twist for a suitable period.

"Oh!" he said, slapping his forehead. "The guys were getting a game together and—"

"I understand," Athena said, though she really didn't. That wasn't exactly true, she thought. She did understand. Starbuck was just never going to grow up. Sure, he was worried about Dalton, but he'd probably given no more than a micron's thought to the bigger problems they all faced. His life was cards, drinking, and the ever-present schemes that he was always positive were going to make him the richest man in the fleet. But Athena had decided that she liked him just the way he was.

She remembered what her father Adama had said. The fruit didn't fall far from the tree, and Starbuck's father had been a hustler. A charming man, always changing, but still a hustler, restless and always on the move. That was why they called him Chameleon. Starbuck wasn't like his father—in fact, sparks had flown whenever they'd met. But he did have something of his father's restlessness. Athena had quietly watched Starbuck's wild relationship with Cassi for yahrens.

Cassi was too gentle for Starbuck. Too trusting, and too nice. It was always so easy for Starbuck to… forget her. Cassi never pushed Starbuck.

Athena knew that Starbuck would never forget *her*. Athena and Apollo were alike in more ways than one. Like their beloved father Adama, they chose not dozens or hundreds of friends like casual Starbuck, but a few careful, select, special companions. Athena let Starbuck into her life, not the other way around, although Starbuck acted like he considered Athena his greatest conquest.

No one conquered Athena. But maybe, with a little time and careful planning, Athena could not just conquer Starbuck, they could become real partners. Maybe even… be sealed.

Meanwhile, Athena's quarry, Starbuck, was happily stowing his cubits away. "Hey," he said. "You convinced those guys I had daggit food for a hand. You—"

"That's right," Athena said. "And I expect you put those winnings to good use."

Starbuck, who thought of cubits like a chubby child thinks of candy, opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. As far as he was concerned, "good use" was right there in his pocket.

"I want flowers and ambrosa," Athena prompted.

Starbuck frowned, and considering a moment. "Yes, of course," he said somewhat reluctantly. "Flowers and ambrosa. Why didn't I think of it?"

"You're learning," Athena said, rising slowly and turning so that Starbuck could get a good look at how well she filled out her uniform. "Flowers and ambrosa cover a multitude of sins."

Starbuck laughed. "Where are we supposed to get flowers and ambrosa?" he asked.

"You'll see," she said.

She'd already seen it by Bay Four. They'd found flowers on that captured barge. The traitors had been taking a lot of unnecessary items over to the *Rising Star*. Turning and smiling over her shoulder, she said, "Come on, Starbuck. Time's a wasting. I want to make this a night you'll never forget."

"I already won forty-three cubits," Starbuck said as he followed. "I'm not about to forget that!"

"They're selling the extras to the highest bidder," Athena said. The proceeds would go toward the families of the people who had died in the terrible accident.

But before they left the "charity sale," he was wishing he could forget: the flowers alone—beautifully lavender Dnigibian orchids in stasis—the flowers alone cost forty cubits. The magnum of real Protean ambrosa—none of that synthesized stuff tonight—the magnum of ambrosa cost thirty.

It was good that there was enough of it to dull the ache where his winnings had been.

Silently, Cassi moved close to Apollo as they stood beneath the perfect, clear dome of the Celestial Chamber. Up here, above *Galactica's* great engines, now silent because the Tylium had all gone dark, Apollo thought it was as though they stood on the horizon of the world, and all the heavens spun above them. It was so quiet that all Apollo could hear was his own breathing.

Apollo wondered if this was the last time he'd get the chance to come to this precious place in his heart. The fate of the *Galactica* itself was in doubt. But if he was spending his last moments in this wondrous place, he was glad that Cassi was at his side. Cassi, delicate and feminine, made no noise, but he could feel her warmth beside him.

Without thinking, Apollo put his arm around her shoulders and drew her close, gazing up at the *Ur* cloud, flashes of brilliant purple, orange, blue, and pink like lightning among planet-bound clouds. But these were no ordinary clouds. They were like the birth of matter at the beginning of time. Maybe this was what it looked like when the universe began, Apollo thought. So many times he had come here by himself, to work, to gather his thoughts. Deep values were in Apollo like veins of gold. Like his father before him, Apollo believed in a higher power, in the Lords of Kobol, and in the lore of their people. Apollo knew the difference between good and evil. He knew that he would always choose good, because that was his place.

If it hadn't been for people like his father, none of the fleet would have survived. All of the colonies would have fallen to the arrogant, cruel and wanton destruction of Iblis, the demon leader of the Cylons. And perhaps, to Baltar.

There was order in the universe, Apollo knew. Good outbalanced evil. But now Adama was gone. Even though it seemed there was no way out of this trap in which the fleet struggled, and the people themselves seemed no longer to believe in their journey, Apollo stood with Cassi beneath the Celestial Chamber dome, looking up at the heavens gone mad.

"It's beautiful," Cassi said.

"You should see the real stars," Apollo said. "The way it looks when we're —" Apollo stopped. Would the *Galactica* ever find a way out of this trap? Fly once more between the stars in search of home?

Cassi seemed to read his thoughts. "We'll find a way out," she said suddenly, with great passion. "The teams will find that bomb. We'll figure out how to help the people, too."

"Cassi," Apollo said, drawing her close and putting his face in her soft, fragrant hair.

"You'll find the way out, Apollo," Cassi said, drawing her arms around his waist. "I know. I trust you."

"Cassi," he said again, raising her face to kiss her, hearing her name catch with emotion in the back of his throat. She was so beautiful, like an innocent young girl, although Apollo knew that she had seen so much. Maybe it wasn't what people had experienced, but what stayed with them—what they chose to let stay—that made someone either hardened and bitter, like Baltar, or innocent, sweet and loving like Cassi.

How had Apollo taken Cassi for granted for so long?

She was the most beautiful woman on *Galactica*. Her lips were the warmest lips he had ever kissed. Her body was like warm water in his hands.

Only love could make order of the world, he thought, as he gently lowered her to the deck. He pushed his tools aside. It was no romantic bed, but Cassi didn't seem to care, and neither did Apollo. He wanted her more than he had ever wanted any woman, even Serina. And now, as he gently kissed Cassi and ran his hands up and down her slender but lovely body, so warm, so yielding, hard in unexpected places, muscled here and there, soft in other places, he made love to her like he'd never made love before.

And Cassi responded, setting Apollo's body on fire. Every muscle in his body was tense, then relaxed, and it was like the energy of the universe flowed through the two of them, joining them. There wasn't much talk, just their names, murmured over and over. Sometimes, Cassi said, "Yes!" in a

joyful cry. Suddenly Apollo realized what Starbuck had held in his hands all those yahrens, and thrown away, in his carefree way.

"You're a treasure," he said suddenly.

Her face turned to him and there were tears in her glowing eyes. She said nothing; her body spoke for her.

"Oh, Starbuck! These are the same flowers that my father always loved!" Athena cried. They had drunk enough of the ambrosa on the way to the viper pod that maintenance had refused to issue one. To Starbuck and Athena!

The nerve of them!

Oh well. Something to be embarrassed about when they were sober. Just now all Athena could think of was the way her father Adama had loved the lavender orchids and how they'd made him think of Athena's mother.

Athena loved flowers, she decided. She'd keep these flowers forever.

And Starbuck, too. Starbuck was the handsomest man she had ever seen. Handsomer than her own brother, and to tell the truth, Athena had always thought Apollo was just about perfect. Well, Starbuck was, too. And the flowers were perfect. Her mind went back to the sectare that Adama had told Athena and Apollo about the flowers. She remembered smelling them, how sweet they were, how beautiful the unique, curved white blossoms were, with a hint of pink on the inside.

"Real pretty," Starbuck said, joining her beside the flowers. Then he grabbed her and kissed her deeply. Athena felt electric warmth fire up and down her body. Suddenly she wanted Starbuck. Badly. But there were also the flowers. The corridor outside the viper pod spun a little around her.

But first, they'd take the bouquet to Apollo's quarters. She had to show them off to him. So beautiful!

She told Starbuck that Apollo was still on the bridge with Tigh. As far as she knew, that was the truth. But if they found Apollo at home, it wouldn't

matter.

He'd be glad about the flowers, and remember right away Adama's story about their mother.

Even if the night had started badly, it was finishing brilliantly.

"Starbuck!" she said, pulling away from his greedy lips, "Let's take these flowers to Apollo's. We can say hello, then—"

"Yeah," Starbuck said, grinning. "Then—" He winked at her and pinched her rear. It was crude, but fun. Just like Starbuck!

Soon, they were singing and laughing down the corridor to Apollo's quarters.

Athena put in the entry code; the door slid open. "Apollo!" she called. There was no answer. "He's not home," she said, turning to Starbuck, suddenly feeling very sad.

"Don't cry," Starbuck said, kissing her again, and brushing a tear away from the corner of her eye.

"Apollo?" Athena called, half-heartedly.

"Come on," Starbuck said, laughing. He pulled her farther into Apollo's quarters.

"Starbuck," she said, but even to her inebriated ears, it sounded like she had really said, "Yes."

"Come on," he replied, more serious this time.

"It's Apollo's bed!" she cried, sounding as amazed as if she'd seen the bed materializing unexpectedly on the bridge.

"Well, he doesn't use it much," Starbuck said in a practical tone. Soon they were both together on the bed, Athena laughing and Starbuck working hard to peel the uniform off Athena's body.

Romance was supposed to be serious, Athena thought. She almost felt like there was a tiny Athena perched on her shoulder, telling her that she shouldn't be romping with Starbuck on Apollo's bed. She looked around the room at Apollo's spare, carefully chosen things. Always so orderly and so careful. Starbuck threw her jacket away, and Athena watched it hit *Galactica's* seal and hang, right from the top point of the star.

"Starbuck!" she cried, wriggling to free herself. He followed her glance and saw the jacket hanging.

"I've never seen a better place to hang a jacket," Starbuck said.

"Starbuck, it's *Galactica's* symbol!" she cried.

"It's very nice," Starbuck said, his voice muffled as he kissed her neck. "Not as nice as you."

"Starbuck," she said, her voice changing. "Starbuck, stop!"

"What?" he said, laughing.

Athena crossed her arms and scooted away from him.

"I'm just some girl to you," she said.

"No," Starbuck protested.

"I don't care what you say, Starbuck," Athena said, her head clearing. "I don't know why I was doing this—what got into me."

Starbuck's brow wrinkled. "The ambrosa?" he suggested.

"A joke!" she cried. "Starbuck, I don't know—maybe you'll never be able to really make a commitment. But I know that—"

"Hey," Starbuck said. "Don't get so…"

"So what, Starbuck? Serious?"

"Well, yeah," he said, sitting back. He tried again to kiss her and she brushed him back.

"Real love is serious, Starbuck," Athena said. She reached for her jacket, but it hung just beyond her fingers. Suddenly her body went ice-cold, recognizing danger before her mind did. She saw Starbuck turning, noticing for the first time that he had somehow removed his jacket, and she heard a voice, calling Apollo's name.

A deep, unpleasant voice.

"Apollo?" the man called. "The door to your quarters was open."

Starbuck was off the bed as fast as a snake striking, hurling the covers over Athena and crouching to face the intruder.

"Apollo's not here," Starbuck said, his voice low and full of danger. Athena saw his laser pistol in his hand.

"I see," the voice said. Then Baltar stepped into Apollo's sleeping quarters, his wicked face grinning.

"I should have killed you when I had the chance," Starbuck snarled.

"Lucky you, Starbuck," Baltar said, staring at Athena. Then he chuckled. "Are you sure you can handle her?"

"Handle me!" Athena cried.

"You know what I mean," Baltar told her.

Starbuck aimed the laser at Baltar, and he nearly fired, but then his face changed—he grew uncertain.

Athena watched all the different emotions battling on Starbuck's face, and finally with a groan, he slapped his forehead in frustration, and sat on the bed, hanging his head and muttering, "Apollo would kill me. I want to blast him, but Apollo would just kill me."

"Is this the behavior I'd expect from a daughter of Adama?" Baltar asked. "The fleet in peril, a rebellion in full swing, and this is what you choose to do?"

"No," Athena said coldly. "It is not." And she gathered her jacket and left.

Starbuck jumped up and ran after her, but it was far too late. Neither of them saw the way Baltar was grinning as he settled back on Apollo's rumpled bed.

In sickbay, Koren lay on his bed, wondering when he'd be well enough to go back home. His dad was bound to be worried.

Cassi was gone; she'd gone off with Apollo. Koren didn't trust Apollo at all. He wondered if he was going to do something bad to Cassi.

As he lay there with his arms crossed behind his head, he was surprised to see someone approach. At first, he thought it was Doctor Salik, but when he sat up and really focused, he realized it was somebody else.

An old man, very important. He knew the man's face even though he'd only seen him on a comm screen before. This was the same guy his dad always talked to. He was the one who…

"Hello, Koren!" said Sire Aron in a cheerful voice.

"Hi," Koren said.

"Listen, your father has asked me to bring you back. Would you like to go home now?"

"Yeah!" Koren said, jumping off the bed despite his bad leg.

The doctor wasn't around, and Koren felt bad about leaving without saying goodbye to Cassi, but he was really glad he was going to see his dad again.

He followed the old man out of sickbay. How did old guys like that get around in those big robes, he wondered.

Man, the *Galactica* was a big ship. Koren's leg was really aching. They walked a long, long way.

Apollo lay in peaceful bliss, Cassi cradled in his arms, looking up and wondering at the star cloud shining and flashing overhead through the

Celestial Chamber dome. He had never felt so at peace. Even with all the danger around them, and *Galactica's* uncertain fate, somehow, Apollo knew that they would find a way out.

"You're wonderful," Cassi murmured. "I'm glad I waited."

"Me too," Apollo said, turning and gently stroking her golden hair away from her face.

Then Cassi suddenly cried out and jumped away.

Apollo heard an aggravating buzz and saw a red flash through the fabric of his tunic. Cassi had been using it as a pillow, and the noise and vibration had alarmed her.

"It's all right," Apollo said, seeing that it was no new major problem, just Baltar wandering once more. "It's just... Baltar." His voice sank in despair.

"Baltar!" she cried, even more frightened.

"He's on the loose again," Apollo said, getting to his feet. "Gods—there's a bomb ticking somewhere on the Battlestar, and now Baltar is loose. What next? I've got to find him."

"Oh, Apollo," Cassi said, her face full of fear and worry.

"This won't take long," Apollo said. "Why don't you get dressed, and wait for me in my quarters?" he asked.

Cassi thought for a moment, then shook her head.

"I should check on Koren," she said. "I'll come later."

"Are you sure?" Apollo asked. After what they had just shared, Apollo was reluctant to let her out of his sight for a centon. Of all times for Baltar to go wandering—he had to give the old man credit. If Baltar's goal was to make Apollo's life a Hades hole, he was succeeding.

"Yes, it's all right," Cassi said. "Go take care of Baltar. Make sure he doesn't cause any trouble."

Smiling, Apollo embraced Cassi gently. She buttoned his tunic for him, and he kissed her for one last time.

"Be careful," she said softly. "Baltar is dangerous."

"I can handle Baltar," Apollo said. But he wished that he didn't have to. Not with everything else. Not even if nothing else was falling apart.

At once, he felt deep guilt for taking the few moments with Cassi. With everything going crazy the way it was, he couldn't believe that he'd thought that was right. But it was too late now.

With a deep breath, Apollo left the Celestial Chamber and traced Baltar's glowing red signal through the *Galactica*. With each step, Apollo became more convinced that there was something very odd about this new escape hijinks. At first, Apollo had thought that Baltar was headed right back to the bar for some more stolen libations, but then Baltar's direction changed. Apollo followed the signal resolutely all the while thinking about the choice curses he'd apply to the old villain to repay him for interrupting his tryst with Cassiopeia.

When the signal finally stopped blinking and became solid red, a harsh tone buzzing from the alarm, Apollo stopped short and looked up, only to find himself at the door to his own quarters.

"What?" he said. The door was partially open.

Apollo entered, ready for anything.

"Baltar!" Apollo called, his fists already clenched.

Apollo searched everywhere, finally looking into his sleeping quarters.

And there he found Baltar, reclining in the reading chair beside the bed, arms crossed behind his head, whistling an old Colonial tune. Baltar's legs were crossed at the ankle, and something about his position made the tracking device look almost merry with its bright red gleam.

He was smoking one of Starbuck's fumarellos.

"This is the life, Apollo," he said. "Have I told you how I envy you?"

As before, Baltar didn't seem to be affected by the severe pain the device caused, pain that would have hobbled an ordinary man in an instant. In fact, Apollo thought, Baltar looked… happy.

"Found your bomb yet?" Baltar asked.

Apollo ignored the question. Of course he ignored it! He was too busy noticing that the covers of his bed were thrown all over the room.

"Have you been sleeping in my bed?" Apollo demanded.

Slowly, Baltar faced Apollo, not moving his legs an inch and barely adjusting his arms. "Ah, Apollo," he said. "Me, sleep here? No, not at all."

Apollo, always tidy, noticed that the symbol of the *Galactica* that hung on the wall beside his bed was off-center.

"Baltar, what are you, were you, doing in here?" Apollo asked as he straightened the six-pointed polished metal star.

"I had nothing to do with that, if that's what you mean," Baltar said, looking at the symbol.

"I'm supposed to believe that you just 'happened' to come in and find things in this condition?" Apollo glared at Baltar, who was still making himself extremely comfortable. It had taken a while; suddenly the whole impact of Baltar, reclining in Apollo's private, personal… his own lounging in Apollo's favorite chair… sank in.

"Baltar, would you get out of my chair!" Apollo cried in disgust and frustration.

"Oh, all right," Baltar grumbled. He pushed out of the chair and stood. "I'm not the first person to use this place this evening," he added under his breath.

"What?" Apollo demanded, ready to leap at the glowering form that hunched on his bed and strangle him.

"I said," Baltar repeated in a louder tone. "I'm not the first person to use your quarters this evening."

At his wit's end, Apollo grabbed some of his bed covers and began twisting them. "Now, what is that supposed to mean?" If anybody else was "using" his bed, it would be Cassiopeia, and Apollo knew exactly where she and he had both been for the previous couple of centars.

"Oh, a little bird named… Athena," Baltar said, putting his finger to his forehead in a mockery of thought.

"Athena!" Apollo cried. "Baltar, you've gone insane. What would Athena be doing in here destroying my bedroom?"

"She wasn't alone, you know," Baltar continued.

This was far too much for Apollo. He strode up to Baltar and grabbed the old villain's collar and lifted him halfway from the bed.

"Enough riddles," Apollo said. "Say what you mean, or I'll…" Apollo let his clenched fist show Baltar the rest of the message.

For the first time, Baltar's dark eyes showed a glimmer of fear.

"Athena was here with Starbuck," Baltar said. "I came in by chance, and I found them."

"What do you mean?" Apollo said. "Here, with Starbuck? Were they waiting for me?"

"Uh, not exactly," Baltar said with a nervous smile.

"Were they ill? Arguing? Playing a joke?"

Baltar shook his head.

"What were they doing in my sleeping quarters?" Apollo demanded.

"What all young people in love do," Baltar said.

"You're not saying…" Baltar nodded, his face solemn.

"You walked in on my sister and Starbuck—" Apollo gave a brief cry, and threw Baltar away from him across the bed, as if the old villain was made of hot coals. "No!" Apollo said, staggering away, and covering his face in shock and shame. From the sheer stress of this revelation, Apollo began to laugh.

When he looked back at Baltar, he laughed even harder, because he saw an expression that he'd never, in all his yahrens, seen on Baltar's evil face. Baltar was blushing!

"I didn't mean any disrespect to your sister," Baltar said.

"My sister?" Apollo asked between laughs. "You didn't mean… disrespect… to Athena?"

"I'd like to know what's so funny," Baltar said, crossing his arms, suddenly petulant.

"Your face," Apollo said, pointing at Baltar. "You were blushing."

"No!" Baltar cried, and his hand went instinctively to his cheek.

"You were. You were embarrassed!"

"Me?" Baltar asked. The old, imperious scowl came over his face. "Never!" he cried.

"You stay here," Apollo commanded. "Don't you move an inch until I get back."

Baltar began to protest as Apollo left. Apollo paused, turning.

"Wait," Apollo said. "You can move an inch, but there's no reason for you not to make yourself useful while I'm gone. Clean up this mess!" he added, gesturing around his sleeping quarters.

"Apollo, wait," Baltar said, but it was too late.

Apollo was off to find Starbuck as fast as his long legs could carry him, and he had a good idea where he'd find him. Lords of Kobol! He should be

doing something about the rebellion! Finding the bomb or dealing with the Council. Finding a way out of this cloud.

But, Apollo, he reminded himself—you're not out there in a Viper. Troy is, with Dalton, Trays, Boomer and Bojay. And all the rest. They've got to do their jobs. No one man can find a way out of this, he reminded himself.

Right now, Starbuck was going to suffer.

Chapter Five

APOLLO SPOTTED Starbuck's golden blond head in the Viper bay corridor, right where Athena found him earlier. Only he wasn't playing pyramid. He was sitting on the floor, his head was hanging down, his chin almost resting on his arms that fenced a flask. The whole effect was like a daggit jealously guarding a meal he had no intention of eating. This wasn't the first time Apollo had spotted Starbuck in this condition. It was probably the thousandth time, but as Apollo looked at his friend and noticed the three long red scratches on Starbuck's cheek, he didn't feel one ounce of pity, and that was a different feeling.

This time, all Apollo felt looking at Starbuck was anger. Starbuck—incapable of taking anything seriously.

"I hope that was a good drink," Apollo said, storming up to Starbuck.

Bleary-eyed, Starbuck raised his head and said, "Oh, it's you, Apollo. Have a seat."

"Sure," Apollo said, but he didn't sound friendly.

"It's been a hell of a night," Starbuck said, raising the flask. He rubbed the scratches on his cheek, wincing. It couldn't have been as bad for Starbuck as it had been for Apollo, but it would be hard for Starbuck to see or care about that.

"Who gave you those?" Apollo could guess, but he wanted to hear it straight from Starbuck.

Ashamed, Starbuck looked away. "Athena," he said, grimacing.

"We've been friends a long time, haven't we?" Apollo asked Starbuck.

Starbuck laughed. "Are you nuts? We've been friends forever."

Apollo didn't respond, and a confused look came over Starbuck's chiseled face, marred by the lurid scratches.

"Apollo, is there something you're not telling me?" Starbuck said, hesitating.

"Maybe there's something you need to tell me, old friend," Apollo said. He never thought he could speak so coldly to Starbuck. Why, he loved Starbuck like a brother. More than a brother. But Athena was his sister, and more than that, she was Adama's daughter.

It was the whole situation that angered him. There were lines that you just didn't cross, but Starbuck didn't seem to know what those lines were. It was bad enough that Starbuck had taken Cassiopeia for granted all those yahrens, but now he was starting in with Athena, and starting in at a time when they were facing destruction from all sides. Athena! Beautiful, virtuous daughter of Adama, fearless and proud. Apollo didn't know whom he was angrier about. Cassi, gorgeous, sweet, loving Cassi, or Athena.

Had the *Galactica* just fought so long that they were forgetting everything? What happened to being tough, being honorable? Everything was falling apart, and Apollo didn't know where to turn.

All he knew was that he'd tolerated Starbuck's foibles for yahrens. Apollo couldn't believe that he'd always laughed at Starbuck. Because it wasn't him —Apollo would never even consider treating a woman the way Starbuck did.

But now Apollo knew firsthand the other side of things. Starbuck was a fool, using Cassi the way he had. He had thrown away… pure gold. But this thing with Athena was totally different.

"Apollo, what's got into you?" Starbuck said, laughing. "Come on, have a drink. I've had a rough night."

"It's about to get rougher," Apollo said in a low, dangerous voice.

"Hey," Starbuck said, trying again to laugh things off. "Look, Athena and I just had a little… disagreement."

"Would that… disagreement… have had anything to do with Baltar?"

Starbuck winced again, and Apollo could see the guilt in his eyes.

"You weren't going to say a thing, were you?" Apollo said.

"Well, uh," Starbuck said.

"You thought you could just march right into my private sleeping quarters and have a…" Apollo paused, realizing that there were other people in the corridor, and they had started to stare.

"Let's move along," he said to Starbuck in a menacing voice. Apollo gave Starbuck a strong shove in the middle of his back to help him on his way.

"I can explain, Apollo," Starbuck said.

"I've heard your explanations before," Apollo said. "I don't want to hear them any more."

"Apollo!" Starbuck said.

"This is the last time," Apollo said. "I trusted you. Counted on you. All you can think of is having a good time! If you don't even have any respect for my quarters, or my sister—or Cassiopeia—then I'm going to do my talking with my fists."

"Apollo, please," Starbuck pleaded, but now they were far down the corridor and there was no one else around.

Starbuck turned to face Apollo.

"No more," Apollo said. "You're not going to treat Athena the way you always treat…"

Starbuck had never been a coward. Apollo watched Starbuck's expression change from concern and worry to a fighting scowl.

"If you want to go," Starbuck said, raising his fists, "Let's go."

Somewhere inside, Apollo knew that this was the exact wrong thing to do, but he didn't care any longer. Fighting adrenaline surged through Apollo's veins as he feinted and easily avoided Starbuck's swing. Ducking low, he powered into Starbuck, doubling him over and landing two or three good blows in Starbuck's midsection.

Apollo heard Starbuck grunt in pain; it sounded fantastic.

Swiveling quickly, he threw Starbuck to the deck. Now that Starbuck was down, Apollo really had the advantage, and he delivered a thundering right to Starbuck's face, breaking a cut above Starbuck's eye.

"Ow!" Starbuck cried.

"There's more where that came from," Apollo heard himself saying. Had he said that? That sounded like something Starbuck would say during a fight. Apollo was usually a silent fighter. He was far too angry to realize that Starbuck was drunk and not up to his usual excellent reaction times.

He slammed Starbuck in his gut with another bone jarring punch.

"Apollo!" cried a woman's voice.

"Stop!" It was yet another woman.

Apollo's eyes were filmed with red. He turned to see Cassi and Athena running toward them from the end of the corridor.

"Oh, no," he said. But whatever else he was going to say was cut short by Starbuck, who wasn't too drunk to take advantage of Apollo's distraction. A fist that seemed to fly out of nowhere connected with Apollo's nose.

Suddenly stars flashed in front of Apollo's eyes, and he reeled back. Now he was the one who was down, and a bleeding Starbuck was straddling him, his right fist raised, ready to strike again.

"Stop right now, you two!" Athena cried.

Cassi hesitated a moment, but Athena bent down and grabbed Starbuck's shoulders.

"That's enough," she cried. "You two are going to kill each other. Don't we have trouble enough without this?"

"Please, Apollo," Cassi said. "Stop."

At the sight of her worried, lovely face, all of Apollo's rage bled out of him and his face began to burn.

Starbuck looked shamefaced, too, as he struggled feebly a moment longer, then lowered his fist and climbed off Apollo.

"Help him up," Athena ordered Starbuck.

Starbuck looked at her as if she had just asked him to fly a recon mission in only his helmet and pajamas and no Viper.

"You heard me," she said.

"All right," he grumbled. Reluctantly, he offered his hand to Apollo.

After a moment, and a long, encouraging smile from Cassi, Apollo took Starbuck's hand and let him help him up.

Athena, outraged, began to lecture both of them at once. With relief, Apollo saw that Cassi showed no signs of wanting to join in. But his heart twisted with unaccustomed jealousy as he saw her approach Starbuck and look at the cut over his eye and the scratches on his cheek with great concern. A mouse was already rising over Starbuck's brow, and blood was streaming over his eye like clown's paint.

"We'd better get you to sickbay," Cassi said to Starbuck.

"I'm fine," he growled, trying to shake her away. He wouldn't meet Athena's eyes.

Apollo gingerly touched his nose and thought, "What about me?" But there was no way he was going to say anything in front of Starbuck, even though Apollo could hear the cartilage on the inside of his nose squeaking as he touched it. He'd never give Starbuck the privilege of knowing that he'd hurt him.

"I can't believe you two," Athena said. Then, she turned her fury back to Starbuck.

"I should have expected this from you," she said in a disgusted voice. And she turned and stalked off. "I'm going back to work."

"Athena!" Starbuck cried. He broke away from Cassi, but stopped short.

Apollo wasn't about to give him any sympathy. But he felt proud of Athena.

Except—she hadn't said goodbye. That hurt.

"Don't try to smile or laugh," Cassi told Starbuck, back in sickbay. "It will just hurt more. You know that!"

"Cassi," Starbuck said, grimacing with the pain.

"What did you think you were accomplishing?" she asked him.

Starbuck shrugged. Cassi could see what lay behind his attitude. She knew him backward and forward.

"It's not just your face that's hurt, is it," she said.

He shook his head.

Athena, Cassi thought. Athena didn't go along with him. She didn't…

"It's no big deal," Starbuck said. But it was a big deal. Cassi saw how hurt he was. He was questioning, thinking deep inside.

Starbuck winced as she washed the big cut over his eye and applied her medi-probe to the swelling bruise, a bulge that really was the size and shape of a mouse, soon to be turning a vivid dark blue-purple.

"He started it," Starbuck said.

Cassi almost laughed. He seemed about as mature as that boy, Koren. She looked around—it was strange. Koren hadn't been there when she'd gotten back on duty. Where could he have gone? Things were so busy, she hadn't

had a chance to ask Doctor Salik. Maybe the boy had gone to see an education center. Probably.

Starbuck relaxed as Cassi's skilled hands soothed and healed his wounds. Turning, he groaned a little in pain. "I think he… did something… he weighs as much as a Viper," Starbuck said.

Cassi lifted Starbuck's tunic and felt along his ribs.

"How many does that make it?" she asked him, looking at him questioningly with her wide blue eyes.

"How many of what?" Starbuck asked.

"Ribs," Cassi said, applying her med-probe. "As in… broken."

"Oh, no," Starbuck said, leaning back on the exam table in resignation to the pain. "Not another one."

"We have to stop meeting like this," Cassi told Starbuck, smiling. Starbuck smiled weakly at her and tried to relax, allowing her to treat him.

Starbuck wasn't thinking. He was just feeling. As Cassi bent over him, her blond hair brushing his face like a bird's wings, he just found himself reaching up and drawing her to him, kissing her deeply. It had been a long time, but this kiss was as long and delicious as any they'd shared in their yahrens together.

A few moments later completely lost in his moment of intimacy with Cassi, Starbuck opened his right eye.

It was the last person he expected to see.

"Great," Apollo said in a low voice, dead and awful. "I should have realized."

"Apollo, it's not…" Cassi cried, but Apollo was already turning away, his face darkened with hurt and betrayal. She had just enough time to break away from Starbuck and run after Apollo's retreating back.

Apollo turned, but even Cassi stopped and stood back to see the expression on his face.

"I came for the boy," he said. "His father wishes to speak to him."

Cassi turned and looked around. "Apollo, he's not here. He wasn't here when—"

Apollo's eyes flew open.

"Koren—he's not here?"

"No!" Cassi cried. "Apollo, I—"

"I've got to get to the bridge," Apollo cried.

Starbuck was still rubbing his head on the treatment table. He looked at Cassi, and she looked back at him.

"I'll never forgive you for this, Starbuck!" she said.

"I don't suppose it would help if I said sorry?" Starbuck asked, forcing a sheepish grin.

"No!" Cassi cried. "It wouldn't. And if I wasn't a sworn healer.

… I swear… I'd rebreak that rib!" She picked up one of Doctor Salik's beakers and hurled it at Starbuck in fury. Starbuck cringed and dodged the beaker. It smashed into the wall beyond his exam table with a burst of bright blue liquid and glass.

Doctor Salik came running in from the back. "What? What's going on?"

"Doctor, Koren's missing," Cassi said. "What happened?" The doctor shook his head. "I… don't know," he said. "He was just here a micron ago."

"You're sure the boy is missing?" President Tigh asked Apollo.

"Certain," Apollo said. "I was just in sickbay." Hoping to have Cassi see to my nose, he thought. Never hoping that he'd find her with… he couldn't

think about it. His nose felt like a Cylon had been examining it with its "loving, gentle" touch. It wasn't *that*

swollen, he thought, and only slightly discolored.

Apollo suddenly noticed that Tigh was paying more attention to him than usual, looking curiously over at him from his bridge console. "What happened to your nose?" he asked suddenly.

"My—uh-oh, I had an… accident," Apollo mumbled.

"Hmm," Tigh said in a reflective tone. "Well, what shall we do? Jinkrat is saying he's coming here to get Koren."

Apollo winced. "Put me through to him on the *Rising Star*."

"Done," Tigh said, indicating the comm.

"Jinkrat," Apollo said as soon as the screen became clear.

"Where is my son?" Jinkrat demanded.

Apollo took a deep breath. "We—we don't know," he said.

He watched Jinkrat's face change from a tense, stern look to complete disbelief.

"I have lived all these yahrens," Jinkrat said slowly. "All these yahrens, and I never imagined that—" He paused, turning. When he turned back, his eyes were blazing in fury.

"You, Apollo!" he cried.

"Jinkrat, we'll find him," Apollo said quickly. "I swear to you—he was under no guard. Perhaps he just wandered—"

"Perhaps! I am to believe you, as I am to believe you did not murder those hundreds on that rescue ship?"

"I'm telling you the truth," Apollo said. "I was just in sickbay myself."

"I wish to speak to the Gemonese woman," Jinkrat said, each word clipped and precise.

"Cassi?" Apollo said.

"I placed my son in her care. She will answer to me if—"

"Jinkrat, Cassiopeia was with me when Koren seems to have—"

"So," Jinkrat said, nodding. "You have also done something with her as well."

"No!" Apollo cried. This was infuriating. Why wouldn't the man just…

"You will return my son to me in twenty centons," Jinkrat said. "Otherwise, I will detonate that bomb because I know that my son will be…" He let the last word go unsaid.

"I give you my word he'll be found safe," Apollo said.

Tigh looked over at Apollo, his eyes incredibly wide.

"Apollo," Tigh said.

Jinkrat closed the communication. The screen went black.

"Tigh, we don't have any choice. Find that bomb—and find that boy!"

Ten centons, and there was still no word of Koren—or the bomb. Apollo slammed his fist on the console.

"Apollo," Tigh said. "I have a communication. It's from Council Member Aron."

"We have been waiting for word about the supplies on that barge," Aron said, smiling.

Apollo's nose was on fire again. He nodded. He turned to Tigh, who checked his databanks. Tigh's fingers moved rapidly. He repeated the motion, cleared his throat, and then looked back at Apollo with an expression of total dismay.

"It's not there," he said softly.

"What?" Apollo said.

"So, we can expect a launch to the *Rising Star* momentarily?" Aron asked politely.

"Yes," Apollo told him.

"Is there something the matter?" Aron asked.

"No, no," Apollo said. "Nothing's the matter. We'll be launching the supplies immediately. They've already been transferred from the original vessel."

Then, he broke the connection.

Tigh grabbed Apollo's arm. "Apollo, that whole barge is gone. There's not a thing in Bay Four."

"But they already took everything off," Apollo said. "We were selling things to put funds aside for the families of the—" Apollo meant the flowers, of course, that had led to so much trouble with Starbuck and Athena, although Apollo didn't know that whole story.

"Just the luxury items," Tigh said. "The main part of the fuel and the food was still on the barge. And Apollo—it's *gone*."

"Lords of Kobol," Apollo said.

"They had nothing to do with it," Tigh said darkly.

"Let's find it!" Apollo cried. And he leapt away, running from the bridge. Running again. The only trouble was, he had no idea where he was going.

Back to sickbay. Maybe Koren had wandered off. Maybe he had.

"I'm going to prescribe a brief furlon for you," Doctor Salik told Apollo.

"No!" Apollo cried. Then, he forced himself to regain his composure. "Where could the boy have gotten to? Salik, how could you—"

"You see the way things are here," the doctor said, gesturing around at the madhouse that was the sickbay.

"I—I know," Apollo said. There was no Koren here. His heart was pounding. How could this have happened. Who? How could the rebels have penetrated so deeply into the *Galactica*?

"I need to treat your injury," Doctor Salik said.

"There's no time!" Apollo cried.

"This will only take a moment," Salik said, and he was right. Almost instantly, he'd applied a huge white plasteen bandage to Apollo's nose. It felt like it covered half his face.

"This is important, Apollo," the doctor said firmly. "Otherwise, your breathing could be impaired by the cartilage healing improperly."

Apollo cringed to hear the nasal whine in his voice. "Does it have to be so —large?"

"It's just a tiny plasteen bandage. I can make it flesh colored if you wish," the Doctor said, chuckling.

The only thing that Apollo was grateful for was that Cassiopeia was on rest period and he did not have to see her in the sickbay. All at once, Apollo's world had become a world of total betrayal and danger. The very fate of the *Galactica*, at the mercy of the relentless Jinkrat.

Apollo felt like his heart was going to explode if he thought about any of it any longer.

"Doctor, I've got to go," Apollo said.

But no sooner had he started to leave than Sheba arrived, limping.

"Sheba!" Apollo cried.

Doctor Salik rushed toward her.

"It's nothing," she said.

The doctor knelt. "Get over here," he ordered. She balked, but followed his instructions. He led her to the same table where he'd put the bandage on Apollo's nose. Apollo tried to help, but Sheba was Sheba: She didn't want any extra assistance.

"What happened?" Apollo asked.

"She's got a bad sprain," Doctor Salik said, probing her ankle.

"I was getting down from my Viper," Sheba said. "I just—"

"Sheba," Apollo said. "You're pushing yourself too hard."

Ordinarily, Sheba would have never made a mistake like that.

"I was searching for that missing barge," Sheba said. "It doesn't make any sense, Apollo. It's got to be there, but it's like it's disappeared into this… cloud!" She waved her arms.

"Sit still!" Doctor Salik commanded. The normally mild-mannered doctor was in command in sickbay. Sheba bristled, but kept still.

Apollo shook his head. "No," he said. "Someone took it. There's a traitor—more than one. They've got inside information. There's somebody turning on us from inside," he said.

"Traitor!" Sheba cried. "I'll give them the full measure of justice when I find them."

Apollo knew that was true; the problem was, could anyone find them in time? He held Sheba's leg steady for the doctor to treat her.

"Apollo," Sheba said. "Let me go. Let me get back out there."

"You're not going anywhere right this centon," Doctor Salik told her. "These tissues aren't going to be ready to hold your full weight for at least a sectare."

"I'll be the judge of that!" Sheba cried.

"Look," Apollo told the doctor. "I'll take care of Sheba. I'll take her to my quarters."

The doctor muttered to himself, then looked around the sickbay. "You're right," he said. "She doesn't need to be here, and she can recover well in your quarters."

Apollo nodded. To Sheba, he said, "Let's talk this over. Maybe—" Apollo thought of Tigh, and Athena. They had to be certain of what they were dealing with in this situation. The bomb, the traitors, now even Koren—missing. There was no way he could find everything on his own. He wanted to put his head together with Sheba, and then they would bring the others on board.

Even with Sheba's outburst when he told her of Cassiopeia's pregnancy, he still knew that he could trust her—maybe more than anybody else. And she was a brilliant strategist, truly the daughter of Commander Cain. And, Apollo thought, Sheba was always his friend. She always had been, and she always would be.

Soon, Sheba was ready to walk, although she was limping, and she and Apollo thanked Doctor Salik for his treatment.

"Thank the Lords for small favors," Apollo muttered to himself as he and Sheba entered his quarters. The fumarello smoke was gone. Baltar was gone.

"Not again," Apollo muttered. But checking his alarm, it looked like Baltar had retreated to his house-arrest warren, no longer wandering and making trouble.

"What was that?" Sheba asked as she followed Apollo inside.

"Nothing important," Apollo told her. A quick glance inside his sleeping quarters showed Apollo that Baltar had even made his bed. And neatly, too!

They sat beside each other on Apollo's simple, yet comfortable bench. Sheba immediately relaxed, putting her injured foot on the low table in front of them, careful not to jar the simple artifacts and mementos that Apollo had placed on the table for decoration and to remind himself of the long yahrens of their journey, as well as their lost home, Caprica.

"Someone's playing us all off each other," Apollo said.

"Every time I think of this mess, I get furious. It's like everything we fought for, my father's death—the loss of the *Pegasus* and Kobol—it means nothing!"

Apollo nodded. "Yes, I understand," he said. "But the question is, why?"

"I'm no psychologist," Sheba said. "Someone's a thief! A liar! A kidnapper! It's this Jinkrat. I say just go on IFB and tell the truth. People will listen. And that will make an end of this!"

"Sheba, Jinkrat wouldn't kidnap his own son. He's a rebel, but he's not crazy."

"I say go over and blast them all!" Sheba said.

Apollo suddenly took Sheba's hand, his heart full of warmth. That was about all the strategy he'd get out of her. Sheba was no plotter. Now that he was sitting beside her, he realized. Sheba! She had never lied to him. He couldn't believe how easily fooled he had been by Cassiopeia's seeming faithfulness. Why, she was as changeable as Starbuck. They were matched —slaves to their emotions, unable to stick to anything for long.

But Sheba? She was rock-steady. No, she had never lied to him. Now, looking at her beautiful, fiery face, he knew that she never would.

"Sheba," he said. "There's something else I wanted to talk to you about."

Her hazel eyes widened. "Not more *news*, Apollo," she said. "Don't tell me Cassiopeia's having twins!" she blurted.

"No," he said, shaking his head ruefully. "Nothing like that. It's just—"

Sheba squeezed his hand, nodding sympathetically. "Go ahead, Apollo," she said.

"I'm just confused, Sheba. You trust people all your life. And then they go and just…" Apollo fell silent. It was Starbuck—and Cassi. People just went and betrayed you in a micron. The traitor was as yet a stranger. But Starbuck—Starbuck was his oldest, closest friend. And he really thought that he'd begun to have feelings for Cassi. Those moments had been special. Or so he thought.

Sheba nodded again. "I understand," she said, her voice full of emotion.

"I have a duty," Apollo said after a while. "But the thing that really hurts—I was starting to feel like I could… love… Cassiopeia. I never cared about anyone like that. Not after Serina. Losing her was…" Apollo couldn't continue. The memories were too painful, and too deep. All at once, the unfairness of it all struck him. Serina, the one woman he truly, deeply loved, torn from him by this war.

"We've all suffered losses," Sheba said. "My father—"

"I know," Apollo said. Sheba was looking at him like she expected him to say something more, but Apollo wasn't sure what that might be. "Your father was a grave loss to us all. I know how you loved him, Sheba. He was a great man."

"As was your father, Apollo. They were both great men." Her voice was deep with emotion.

Thoughtfully, Apollo nodded. Adama and Cain—what would they do without them? Not for the first time since this crisis began, Apollo felt the heavy burden that was on his shoulders. A burden that Adama carried with such ease and grace. Could Apollo ever achieve that level of greatness? First, they'd all have to survive.

"Apollo," Sheba said suddenly, leaning forward. "Have you ever thought that there's something different—about both of us?"

"Different?" Apollo asked, puzzled by the sudden change in Sheba's tone.

"Yes!" she said, her face glowing. "Apollo, I've waited a long time to tell you this."

Apollo held her hand tightly and looked into her fierce, beautiful eyes. Sheba—the fighter—full of fire and passion and courage. "Tell me what?" he asked.

"We are both the children of great warriors," she said.

"The pride of our people. Your father, and mine, guided us out of the great disaster. They had the vision—they *knew*," she said.

Apollo nodded. "Thinking about that," he said, "It just makes me angrier about this rebellion. We are all that stands between the people and complete annihilation. But my father always told me that to lead, one must stand alone. That was what he always said."

"Not always alone," Sheba replied, looking up at Apollo with an expression that he couldn't understand. Clearly, she was overcome by emotion. But Sheba had always been a very emotional person, quick to anger, not spending a lot of time in thought, but choosing action, just as her father had. It was strange, Apollo thought. Why would Sheba have waited such a long time to tell him that she thought they had a lot in common? Everyone knew that already.

"I know you're by my side now, Sheba," Apollo said, reassuring her. "We'll overcome this crisis. You'll—" But he was cut short by Sheba's sudden embrace.

Her mouth sought his eagerly. Eyes wide, Apollo felt her kiss, and he leapt back, astonished.

"Sheba!" he cried.

Her face showed signs of hurt because he had pulled away, but hope still shone in her eyes. "That's what I've been wanting to tell you, Apollo. I love you. I always have."

"Sheba, I," he managed to stutter.

"No, Apollo," she said, touching his lips to quiet him. "Don't say anything right now."

Apollo did as Sheba commanded, because his mind was reeling and he truly couldn't think of anything he could possibly say.

Sheba appeared to gather her composure and make some kind of decision as Apollo watched her, speechless.

She stood, smoothing her uniform. "Don't say a word," she ordered Apollo. "Just meditate about what I've said." She paused, her face taking on the determined expression that Apollo knew so well. "I have thought about this," she said. "You are the son of Adama. I am the daughter of Cain. What could be more appropriate? Meditate on the blood that we both share—blood of the greatest warriors our people have ever known. Go to your sanctuary, Apollo. After a time, it will all become clear."

Then, she threw her cloak back dramatically and strode off.

Pausing at the door, she turned back. "Apollo, I have made up my mind," she said. "Now you must make up yours."

Sheba had always thrown caution to the wind. In the strangest way, Sheba was right.

Somehow, in all of his confused seeking of answers, Apollo had forgotten the most important thing about Sheba. She might have been slender, feminine, almost delicate in appearance, but she was the toughest, most willful, stubborn, infuriating woman he had ever known. His nose began to throb painfully, and all he could think of to do as Sheba left was to reach up and rip Doctor Salik's plasteen bandage off and hurl it to the floor.

That was gone, and so was the rest of Apollo's uncertainty.

He had to understand Jinkrat's unholy rage. That was the key. Understanding where this rebellion was coming from would take all of the depth that Apollo was beginning to develop inside.

Wild emotions played through Apollo as he sat, trying to meditate and see the way out. He saw images—of his father, Adama. Somehow, he thought that if Adama had been there to observe Sheba's proud declaration of love, Adama would have laughed. But also, with his wise, firm way, he would have reminded Apollo that there was truth in what Sheba had said—at least about the two of them sharing a heritage, and a deep loyalty to *Galactica's* desperate mission to save their people and find a home at last.

Then his reverie was interrupted. Athena was contacting him from the *Daedalus*.

"Apollo," she said. He sighed. How could he have thought he could do it all by himself?

"Athena, some sectares, don't you just wish you were…" he said, leaving the last thing unsaid.

"I know, Apollo," she replied. "I came to tell you that I'm sorry. About the thing with Starbuck. We shouldn't have—"

"It's not your fault, Athena," Apollo said. "Starbuck's a—"

"No," she said, interrupting him. "It was my idea. I convinced Starbuck to come to your quarters. We both had too much ambrosa."

"Athena, there's a traitor on the *Galactica*. We can't find Koren, and we can't even find that bomb. I can't cover the whole ship myself; I thought if I meditated, that I could find some answers. I have a feeling…" he said, thinking hard. "I have an instinct that Jinkrat is no ordinary rebel. He's been used—lied to. Yes, he's got reason to be angry. But there was no way to avoid this, Athena. We had no choice. With all the fleet's been through, some people were bound to die."

Athena shook her head. "Why doesn't he understand—we're all suffering! How can he believe it's personal, that we're against him? We helped his son. We had no idea that… Apollo, we don't even know if he's been kidnapped. That boy's independent enough to wander off on his own."

"Considering what happened in the Council, I doubt that anyone but Jinkrat himself can stop this madness. I have to speak to him directly, Athena," Apollo said.

"Apollo!" Athena cried. "You're putting your life in the hands of a man who's got a bomb on the *Galactica* —right now!"

"He's full of rage, Athena," Apollo said. "But he's not a liar. I sense a great evil. And it's not him. Somebody's using him. Somebody's manipulating us, everything."

"Baltar," Athena said. "I wish I could—"

"No," Apollo said. "Baltar's back in his quarters. He still knows something, but this isn't Baltar. I don't know if it's anybody. I just can't see clearly. We're tearing ourselves apart from within. Help me, Athena." Across the distances, brother and sister communicated without words.

Athena's eyes went wide. "Iblis," she whispered.

Apollo saw her vision, too. "Exactly," Apollo said. "There are so many lies. We've had to make tough choices, but somebody or something is turning everything inside out. Everything!"

"This is definitely like Iblis, Apollo," Athena said. Then, her tone changed. "We're still searching for that barge, Apollo. And Tigh hasn't found any sign of the boy."

"Or the bomb," Apollo said.

Athena shook her head.

"Join with me," Apollo asked her.

And together, they joined across space in meditation. At once, a force that neither of them understood linked brother and sister. Apollo saw the fleet in flames, and images of people battling without hope, vicious murdering and killing—blue bolts of laser fire cutting through dozens of helpless, shrieking women and children.

As long as they searched, as hard as they sought illumination, there was nothing but destruction, disaster, and mayhem. Desperate, Apollo turned his mind from the fleet outward, seeking in the *Ur* cloud itself.

He and Athena, joined as one, traveled through the strange cloud seeking the missing patrols, and seeking a way out of the cloud. But wherever they turned, there was nothing.

A strange, cruel voice laughed, but said nothing. Apollo thought that he recognized the voice, but with nothing more than a single laugh, he could not identify it, and linked as he was with Athena, he knew that she was puzzled as well.

Exhausted, brother and sister finally broke free of their searching. This was not like the Battle of Kobol. No answers were coming to them at all. There were no magical, mysterious coordinates to save them this time.

"Why can we find no answers?" Apollo asked Athena.

"I don't know," she said. "But we must have hope. The Lords of Kobol would not abandon us," she said.

"All I saw was death," Apollo said, "death and destruction."

"Apollo," she said, her voice full of feeling. "Don't lose hope. We conquered the Cylons, and the Chitain. We are trapped here, but not forever. I know there's a way out. Apollo—remember Baltar. Baltar knows something. He has the key. We must get it out of him!"

"That voice," Apollo said. "You heard it laughing, too."

Athena nodded. "It reminded me of Baltar," she said. "That's what made me think of him, more than Iblis."

"He is not telling all he knows," Apollo said. "It's the strangest thing. I don't trust Baltar—who could ever trust him? But he's changed, Athena. He's not the same Baltar we knew and hated all these yahrens."

"Has he said nothing since you released him?" Athena asked.

Apollo shook his head. "It seems like he's trying," he said. "He's been wandering—driving me crazy. And talking in riddles."

"That's Baltar," Athena said. "I can't believe he walked in on me and Starbuck!"

"That's how I found out about you and Starbuck."

"Oh," Athena said, and her face darkened in anger. "That rotten, stinking, lying, spying—"

"He made himself perfectly at home," Apollo said. "But he did as I told him. He even made the bed."

Athena thought a moment, then she laughed. "I suppose we should be grateful for anything that Baltar does that's not destructive," she said. "In its own way, it's a miracle."

But Apollo didn't reply because there was another voice at his door. "May I enter?" It was Tigh.

"Of course," Apollo said. He turned away from Athena's image to greet Tigh. Tigh's normally stoic face was full of worry.

"Apollo," Tigh said, nodding to Athena. "We still haven't found the bomb or Koren. But there's more news."

"What?" Apollo and Athena said in unison. "What next?"

"Jinkrat is on his way to the *Galactica*. According to Sire Aron, he's willing to talk to the Council before he detonates the bomb." . "That puts him in our hands!" Apollo cried. "I can't believe it. Are you sure?"

Tigh shook his head. "No, Apollo. Sire Aron has… Apollo, the Council has removed you from command. That was Jinkrat's requirement. If Koren is not there to greet him when he arrives, he will detonate the bomb from his transport."

"Lords of Kobol," Apollo said. "I can't—"

"I'm afraid it's true," Tigh said. "I was unprepared for the commands that came in from them. If I'd known," he said, shaking his head in regret. "I would have seen to it that transmissions were suffering an interruption due to this *Ur* cloud. I would have ignored it, Apollo."

"You can't foresee everything," Apollo said, but he looked around wildly.

"Sire Aron is very regretful, but the Council has put him in charge of the *Galactica*," Tigh declared.

"He's an old man!" Apollo cried. "What's gotten into them? Do they think they'll defend against the rebels with words? How can they—"

"The Council said they've seen the light," Tigh said, his voice and face full of disgust.

"The light!" Athena cried. "They're saying they've had a vision from the Beings of Light?"

Tigh shook his head, then shrugged. "No, but they've… Apollo, there's one more thing."

"What's that?" Apollo asked. "They want the Viper pilots to sing and dance?"

"They're organizing a tribunal," Tigh said, "to try you for crimes against the people and the fleet."

"Tigh!" Athena cried. She'd heard the whole thing.

"I did manage to cut the transmission short," Tigh said. "I'm really not sure when they scheduled it, or who's responsible to deliver you up to them," he told Apollo.

Despite the disaster, Apollo couldn't help but smile at faithful President Tigh, standing proud in his immaculate uniform.

"Well," he said, looking at Athena's image and back to Tigh. "What would you suggest that we do?"

"Tell the Council where they can stick it!" Tigh exclaimed.

Athena grinned. "Tigh's right," she told Apollo. "We have no time to negotiate with them, and they've proven they're out of their minds."

"By my orders, the Council is to disband until I have met personally with the rebel Jinkrat and negotiated a peace," Apollo commanded. "Sire Aron can't do this. He hasn't got the authority. Tigh, transmit that command on every channel, throughout the fleet. The fleet is now under martial law and my word is the final one on every matter."

"Yes, sir!" Tigh said, saluting Apollo.

"I'll join you on the bridge momentarily," Apollo told Tigh. "There's one more thing for me to do before that."

Athena broke the transmission, but not before she told Apollo that *Daedalus* would launch more Vipers in search of the missing barge.

Chapter Six

APOLLO BELIEVED that he knew where Koren was. It was only a matter of traveling two decks to find out if his instincts were true, but the cursed alarm began to signal him as soon as he left his quarters.

Baltar. Escaped again!

Swearing under his breath, Apollo stood, turning to see his bane heading straight toward him.

"Baltar, I don't have time for this," Apollo said. "I've got a lost boy to find, not to mention a bomb, and a rebellion in full swing."

"Bad news, Apollo?" Baltar asked.

"As if you care! You've been less helpful than a three-legged daggit," Apollo growled, shouldering his way past the older, smaller man.

"You've had visions," Baltar said. "So have I."

"Baltar!" Apollo cried in frustration. "I don't have the time. This rebel and the Council have gone mad. We've got traitors in our midst. I've had to declare—"

"Yourself as the sole dictator of the fleet," Baltar said, smiling. "Isn't that what you've always wanted, Apollo? Just like Adama. No politics, no pesky civilians mucking about in the all-important affairs of command?"

"You're the one obsessed with power, Baltar. Don't charge me with your own failings."

"We are each mirrors," Baltar said softly. "And none of us so different as we would imagine."

"Baltar, in five million yahrens, you and I could *never* have a single thing in common," Apollo said. The very thought of it was beyond Apollo. Baltar was greed and selfishness personified. If there was any kind of mirror

reflecting them, it was reversed; if Apollo was matter, then Baltar was anti-matter. Baltar wouldn't know honor and duty if it presented itself to him as an opportunity to be the richest dictator in the universe, ruling over Cylons and people alike. Baltar was so twisted that he'd somehow find a way to evade even the duty he so desired, the terrible urge for domination and power and respect that had driven him to destroy his life, and the lives of countless others, on Caprica, Gemoni, and the other ten colonies.

Respect had to be earned, Apollo thought. As his father Adama had earned it. And Baltar had so foolishly, blindly thrown away what little he had earned.

"Things are not always as they seem," Baltar said. "Choose your enemies wisely, Apollo."

"Baltar, what are you talking about?" Apollo asked. "We're in full rebellion. I'm going to deal with it personally." It was no vision that he'd had—it was pure instinct. There was no way that Jinkrat would have spirited his own son away. The man's anger was real. And that left… Apollo couldn't believe it, but there was only one way to know for certain. If only Baltar would—Apollo paused, suddenly wondering how Baltar had gotten his news, since Tigh and Athena had left only microns earlier. "How did you know of this?" he asked.

"I have my sources," Baltar said, cryptically.

"Spying!" Apollo cried.

"No," Baltar said. "Do you think you are the only individual on *Galactica* with any type of insight?"

Apollo gestured in complete frustration. "Baltar, look," he said.

"Either you help, or you don't. It's as simple as that. And talking in riddles at a moment like this—it's no help."

"The people believe in miracles," Baltar said. "There are stranger things in this *Ur* cloud than you imagine. Don't forget—we have a lost battlestar—"

"Baltar, I've got to go," Apollo said, fed up with Baltar's riddles. "For the time being, you stay here in my quarters. If that security tracker doesn't bother you, you might as well make yourself at home—again!"

Apollo turned to go.

Baltar merely smiled. "Remember what I've said, Apollo. Miracles can happen, and people believe in them," Baltar reminded Apollo. "And also remember that people are seldom who they seem."

With a last, frustrated cry, Apollo started on his mission. He hated the thought of it. But he had to go. Whatever the truth was, he'd find out, no matter how it hurt. The traitor would be unveiled, and the rebel Jinkrat had to be stopped—once and for all.

Koren was bored in Sire Aron's quarters. There wasn't much that an old man would have lying around that would interest a boy of twelve yahrens. A bunch of old, boring books that were too hard to read. How long was he supposed to stick around? And where was his dad? The old guy had said he was going to be right there.

Centons ago!

And Koren especially didn't like the ugly bald guy that just sat there and stared at him. He didn't like his black uniform, and he didn't like his ugly little eyes that were way too close together.

Maybe he thought he was better than Koren just because he worked for the high and mighty Council of Twelve. His dad belonged on that Council! In fact, the old man had said something like that, which made Koren feel proud, but he wasn't sure he trusted the guy even so.

Koren didn't trust anybody but himself and his dad. It was about time to figure out exactly what was going on, and maybe to get out of this boring place and find his dad.

So, Koren sat cross-legged on the floor across from the ugly guy and stared at him.

It didn't take very long.

"What is it you want, boy?" the guy finally said. Koren could tell he was getting angry.

So, Koren didn't say a thing.

"What? Why are you staring! I'll put you in—" The guy retrieved a pair of restraints from his belt.

Koren still didn't say anything.

"Kid, you better go sit over there and quit bugging me," the man said. "Don't you know who I am?"

Koren had an idea of something that he could say, but he thought it would be better to keep his mouth shut.

Now the guy was on his feet, charging at Koren.

"What's that in your hand?" Koren asked.

Now the guy stopped short. "What do you mean?" He looked at the restraints. "Oh, it's something we use for—" Then he looked suspiciously at Koren. "You know what these are. What kind of game are you playing?"

"Nuh-huh," Koren said. "I never seen anything like that before. What are they for?"

The guy laughed. "I guess you are pretty isolated over there with all those refugees," he said.

"Yeah," Koren said. "Can I see those?"

"Wait a second," the guy said, kneeling beside Koren.

Koren still kept his arms crossed. He didn't want the guy to think…

"They work like this," the man said. He opened the restraints by pressing a button on their side. Then he pressed a code and the restraints snapped open. They'd fit right over somebody's wrists.

"Wow," Koren said, acting like he was incredibly fascinated. "Can you close them up again?"

"Yeah," the guy said. "Like this. You have to know the code to get them to open and close."

Koren knew the code.

"So, put them on me," Koren said.

Laughing a nasty laugh, the man told Koren to scoot around and put his hands behind his back. Koren felt the restraints snap shut around his wrists.

He pretended to struggle for a bit, then he looked up into the man's ugly face. "You can take them off now," he said.

"No way," the man said, his eyes narrow and mean.

"Please!" Koren said. "I know how they work now. So, you can take them off."

"You wanted me to put them on," the ugly man replied. "So, if anybody asks, that's their answer."

"Where's my dad?" Koren asked, acting scared.

"He's coming," the man said.

Koren didn't believe him.

The funny thing about the restraints was that Koren could slip them off in a micron; not to mention the fact that he knew the code now. Maybe it worked for *all* of them.

"Let me go!" Koren started screaming. He kicked out with his legs and started thrashing.

"Hey!" the guy cried. "Easy! Calm down." He looked around nervously. Koren figured that his guesses were right. He wasn't supposed to be here, and this was all some kind of weird secret.

He screamed and thrashed some more.

"Stop that! You'll—"

Get other people to come in here, Koren thought. So he really screamed now.

The man threw himself on Koren, and tried to put his hand over Koren's mouth.

That was all the time Koren needed to slip his hands free. He remembered what his dad had shown him. And drove the heel of his palm up hard, right into the guy's big, ugly nose.

Koren felt something *give* when he did that. And the guy's eyes rolled up in his head, right in that micron. Blood gushed all over. The guy was half-conscious, and really heavy. Koren had to slide his body away, wriggling like a fish, but he got free.

As quickly as he could, he punched in that code he remembered, and the restraints snapped open. The guy was groaning, but there wasn't any strength in his big, heavy arms. Koren grabbed one hand, then the other, and got both hairy wrists into those restraints.

Snick!

They were shut. That was one big, ugly guy who'd be in a lot of trouble when he came to his senses.

And in another micron, Koren was on his feet, running toward that outer door as fast as his feet could go.

As Koren was running down the corridor, trying to remember all the landmarks he'd passed on that long walk with Sire Aron, and Apollo was headed on his mission, Starbuck was in the launch pod readying his Viper for another patrol.

Sheba arrived, ready to leave on her own mission. "What did you say to Athena, Starbuck?" Sheba asked, eyeing Starbuck's bruises and cuts.

"She just scratched me," Starbuck said, in no mood for Sheba's teasing.

Sheba laughed. "Right," she said. "Just a scratch or two."

"Hey," Starbuck said. "Cut it out. There's something coming over the comm."

"What?" Sheba asked, checking her Viper's laser cannons.

"Two Vipers, incoming," Starbuck said.

"We don't have—" Sheba said.

"You're right, we don't," Starbuck replied. "It's two of the missing Vipers!"

"The patrol!" Sheba cried.

Sheba and Starbuck took off at a dead run, heading for the landing bay.

When they got there, Starbuck's excitement faded, because it wasn't Dalton. He could tell by the markings right away that the Vipers belonged to Boomer and Bojay. But at least they'd have some word.

Starbuck pushed his way through the crowd of rejoicing pilots and mechanics to find Boomer, who was removing his helmet, looking totally drained.

"Boomer!" he cried, embracing his longtime wingman and friend.

At the same time, Bojay greeted Sheba with another enthusiastic bear hug.

"What happened?" Starbuck demanded of Boomer. He didn't have to say anything about Dalton.

Boomer answered right away. "She's still out there, man. They had more fuel. We lost them in this fracking cloud—we had no choice."

"But she's all right?" Starbuck asked.

"Yeah," Boomer assured him. "As far as I know, they're fine. We just can't get anything through that mess out there. But we went out, Starbuck—way

out."

"Why didn't you and Bojay make them come back?" Starbuck asked, his face marked by frustration.

"We couldn't, man. We were really low on fuel, and we just—lost them. Visual, comm, everything," Boomer said. "They were doing something different, using inertia to carry themselves farther. But they were okay, Starbuck. Dalton said if anybody found the way out, it was going to be her, Trays and Troy."

"Boomer, do you realize how long we've been looking for you? We were almost convinced you were—"

Suddenly Boomer's honest face changed as he realized what had happened.

"I never realized," he said. "We thought you'd just think we were on patrol. I never—"

"We were getting to the point where we figured we'd never see you again," Starbuck said.

Boomer shook his head. "I didn't know," he said. "You must have—"

"Yeah," Starbuck said. "I was pretty worried about Dalton. And you too, man." He embraced Boomer one more time.

Meanwhile, Sheba told Bojay that she had to get Apollo right away—briefly sharing everything that had happened—at least as much as she could.

"A bomb!" Bojay cried.

"That's right," Sheba said. "But Apollo's got a plan. Tigh and Athena are on it. Bojay—I have to go," she said, tearing away from Bojay and heading off to find Apollo. "Apollo's going to get that boy back, and we'll find that bomb."

For once, Bojay had no quick retort as Sheba took off.

Turning to Starbuck, he said, "You would have thought she would have at least kissed me!"

Starbuck grinned, and Bojay joined Boomer and Starbuck in sharing their own thoughts about the *Ur* cloud and the trouble that lay out there.

"I don't know if there is a way out," Boomer said. "I mean, Dalton was pretty positive, but I don't know. It's like a ship's graveyard or something. I never saw anything like it."

Amid all the cheering and rejoicing, Starbuck and the other pilots sensed something change. People began to fall silent, and soon the crowd parted. A tall, gaunt form broke through the crowd, coming right up to the four friends.

"You have survived a great journey," the newcomer said in his deep, sonorous voice.

It was Gar'Tokk—the Noman. Starbuck wondered where Gar'Tokk had been lurking. He hadn't seen him in sectares or even heard about him since the victory celebration, and that seemed like another lifetime ago.

"You sure have a way with being the life of the party," Starbuck wisecracked.

The Noman's heavy brows lowered over his deep-set eyes.

Somehow, Starbuck knew, that expression wasn't a noman's version of a smile.

"I come to speak of serious matters," the noman said.

Bojay and Boomer looked at one another, wondering what the noman wanted with Starbuck, of all people. Gar'Tokk was known for not speaking with anyone except Apollo, and in fact, he had always acted like he was within a hair's width of putting out a blood hunt for Starbuck, just like his fellow nomen had with Starbuck's father, Chameleon. Nomen simply had no sense of humor at all.

"Hey, we've got something to celebrate," Starbuck said, grinning and clapping Gar'Tokk on his shoulder. The slow, dour double take that Gar'Tokk did quickly dampened Starbuck's enthusiasm, and Starbuck rocked back on his heels and put both his hands in his pocket.

"I forgot," Starbuck said sheepishly. "Never touch a Noman without his permission."

Bojay raised his hand to his mouth and snickered, stopping only when Starbuck shot him an enraged look of warning.

"Come with me," Gar'Tokk said in his low, menacing voice. His rough hand emerged from his cloak, beckoning to Starbuck.

"Hey, guys, I'll catch up with you later," Starbuck told them. He looked pleadingly at them for help, but Bojay and Boomer's expressions told him that this Noman problem was Starbuck's and Starbuck's alone to solve.

"Just my luck," Starbuck said under his breath, thinking that Gar'Tokk couldn't hear him.

"There is no such thing as luck," the noman growled as he led Starbuck through the crowd to an unknown destination.

"All right," Starbuck said in total irritation, after Gar'Tokk had led him through a seemingly endless series of twists and turns to a tiny engineering relay room hidden in a little-visited corner tucked away behind *Galactica's* starboard launch bay.

"This room is shielded," Gar'Tokk said.

"What do you mean?" Starbuck asked. He blew dust from the untouched wires and looked around. "Who'd shield this? Nobody's been here in yahrens." Starbuck began to cough. "Hundreds of yahrens!" he added.

"There are eyes that see," Gar'Tokk said enigmatically. "But they do not watch this place."

"What… eyes?" Starbuck asked.

"You cannot understand," Gar'Tokk said. "You are a foolish man, but you are—friend—to Apollo."

"I don't know about that," Starbuck said. He touched the huge bruise over his eye and shuddered. It still hurt.

"Yes," Gar'Tokk said. "Nomen fight as well. But true-friends-brothers… are always one."

"I don't think Apollo's eager to be my friend right about now," Starbuck said.

"That is of no matter!" Gar'Tokk said, glowering.

"Yeah, right," Starbuck said, gesturing to calm down the suddenly angry Noman, who towered over him.

Starbuck knew that the Noman could twist him into a knot and break him over his knee in a micron. "Anything you say, Gar'Tokk."

"Apollo has need of his true friends right now," Gar'Tokk said. "There are those who plot against him. Dangerous ones."

"You got that right," Starbuck said. "The rebels and Baltar," he added.

"No," Gar'Tokk said. "The rebels are but a veil. And Baltar is not Apollo's enemy."

"Gar'Tokk, I'd love to stay and chat," Starbuck said, thinking only of how quickly he could get back to Boomer and find out some idea of where Dalton, Trays and Troy had been heading. "But I really have to run."

"Stay," Gar'Tokk said, enforcing his request with an iron grip on Starbuck's shoulder, pulling him back into the alcove.

Starbuck nodded, looking fearfully into the Noman's impassive face.

"Apollo fights the enemy within," Gar'Tokk said. "And the enemy with a false face."

Starbuck nodded. "Yeah," he said, even though he didn't understand a syllable. Starbuck just hoped to calm the Noman, who seemed like he was about to break into an insane fury at any moment.

Suddenly a dagger glittered in Gar'Tokk's hand. Starbuck cried out and struggled, but the Noman whirled Starbuck around and grabbed his other hand as easily as if Starbuck was a child.

"Hey, easy," Starbuck said.

But before he could say anything more, the dagger slashed across Starbuck's palm and Starbuck cried out, not so much in pain, because it had been so quick, but in shock.

Then the Noman released him, and Starbuck, holding his hand, watched in stunned silence as the noman raised the dagger once more, this time to make an identical slash across his own palm.

"We join in blood to protect Apollo," Gar'Tokk said.

Eyes wide, Starbuck stood frozen as the Noman grasped Starbuck's arm and brought Starbuck's palm together with his own.

"Our blood is mingled. We will not rest while Apollo is in danger. Our lives are forfeit if harm comes to him."

For once, Starbuck had nothing to say. He wondered if the Noman's blood mingling with his would turn him into some kind of seven-foot tall bearded monster—loathed and feared by all women—and worst of all—too scary to even consider playing triad with, and with no sense of humor.

"It is done," Gar'Tokk said. He released Starbuck, pushing him away, but not roughly.

"Listen," Starbuck said. "I don't know—"

"All that needed to happen has happened," the Noman said.

"What happened?" Starbuck asked. Who could understand a Noman?

"I sense that you want to go," Gar'Tokk said.

"No, really?" Starbuck said sarcastically.

"Do not mock this," the Noman growled. "But I understand more than you know, Starbuck."

All Starbuck could do was stare at Gar'Tokk in amazement.

"I know that you wish to find your daughter, blood of your body. This, a Noman understands."

"Dalton!" Starbuck cried. "What do you know about Dalton?" he asked.

"I do not see into this cloud," Gar'Tokk said. "But your friends have some knowledge. You may go to them. For the time being, I will carry the burden of protecting Apollo. For all the danger we face, the greatest danger is not yet here."

"What do you mean, 'greatest danger?'" Starbuck asked.

"You will learn. You may go to find your daughter if you wish. But do not take too long, Starbuck. The bond will call you back, in any case."

"Yeah," Starbuck said. "I can imagine," he added, though he really couldn't.

With that, Gar'Tokk drew his hood close to his bearded face, and Starbuck took off, racing back to catch up with Boomer and Bojay. At least the Noman had said one thing that made sense. Boomer and Bojay would be able to put Starbuck on Dalton's trail. And Starbuck was sick of waiting, and sick of fighting, and really sick of insane conversations and getting cut to shreds by crazy nomen in closets.

Dalton was out there, lost in the *Ur* cloud, and she needed him. Maybe now more than ever.

Apollo was at a full run, nearly at his destination.

He reached Sire Aron's quarters to find the door wide open, and a very strange sight within. He'd been preparing himself for a confrontation;

accusations—maybe even a fight. Because there was one common element to everything that had happened. A common element with a wise, elderly and friendly face.

But that common element was nowhere to be seen. Apollo's eyes narrowed as he spotted a council security guard curled on the floor, his wrists shackled behind his back, blood pouring out of his nose. Apollo knelt beside the man, checking to see how badly he was injured.

"The kid," the man muttered, half-conscious. "He took off."

There was only one kid who'd be taking off. And of course he'd run away, Apollo thought. But how by the Lords of Kobol had a boy of twelve yahrens overcome a fully armed Council Security guard?

He didn't want to think the rest of what he was thinking, but the pieces were beginning to come together in his mind. Ugly ones.

"Why are you here?" Apollo asked the man.

"Gotta get the kid," the man said again. He was clearly not thinking straight, and maybe his eyesight was bad, because he didn't seem to recognize Apollo.

Thank the Lords of Kobol for that.

Torn as to what to do, Apollo contacted sickbay.

"There's an injured man in Sire Aron's quarters," he said. They'd be on their way.

Badly injured, Apollo realized. Koren! The boy was some fighter. Apollo marveled at his resourcefulness, even as he wished he could get his hands on him and put a stop to this insanity.

"Tigh!" Apollo said next. "Tigh, I'm in Sire Aron's quarters. Where is he?"

From the bridge, Tigh answered. "He's… they're in the Council Chambers right now. The rebel has arrived on board *Galactica*."

Time was so short.

"Tigh," the Council Guard muttered. "Damn him!"

Well, out of the mouths of… how many of these guards were traitors, Apollo wondered.

Apollo knelt close to the guard. "Yeah," he said, trying to make his voice sound hard and cruel. "Damn that Tigh and Apollo." This was hardly in character for Apollo, but the man was out of it. Maybe he could get some information out of him like this. He surely didn't recognize Apollo at all!

"Apollo's finished," the man muttered.

"About time," Apollo said.

"Yeah." The man blinked, and for a micron, Apollo thought that he recognized him, but he thrashed around instead and said, "Kid ran out. Gotta get him or we're all dead men."

Dead men! But Apollo asked, "Just over a kid?"

But that was all the information Apollo was going to get. The man's eyes rolled up again and he lost consciousness.

Under any other circumstances, Apollo would have stayed to help. He might have even carried the man to sickbay, even though he looked incredibly heavy. But these weren't just any circumstances.

Apollo's vision hadn't shown him this. A guard in Sire Aron's quarters and a "runaway kid." Find him! Or we're all dead men. True for everybody, Apollo guessed.

Out in the corridor, Apollo paused for a micron before recontacting Tigh on the bridge.

"Tigh, Koren was in Sire Aron's quarters. Get as many search teams as you can down on this deck. He can't be that far; he doesn't know the ship."

"Apollo," Tigh said. "We're overextended. Everyone's with Sheba right now, heading for sickbay. They think they've located the bomb."

"I'll meet them there," Apollo said. And he was running—again.

Sheba was rushing to find Apollo, her hurt ankle throbbing, when she caught one of the security teams in the corridor.

"We've checked the entire ship," one of the men told her. "And you haven't found a thing?" Sheba asked. "Look harder!"

"Just one place left to check," another team member said.

"Sickbay. Never thought to try—"

"That's where I'm headed," Sheba said. "Apollo's—" She paused, but only for a micron.

"Let's go!" she cried. "Everyone there's in danger!"

At a full run, the whole group set off, men and women, led by Sheba, who'd forgotten every bit of pain in her ankle.

They burst into sickbay. Cassi saw them first, turning, her eyes wide. Doctor Salik came from the lab, pointing at them and saying something about sick people needing peace and quiet.

The team immediately fanned out, scanning sickbay for signs of explosives.

Then Apollo rushed in, heading straight for Sheba.

"This is the only place we haven't checked," Sheba told him. "But there's something else—" she said, out of breath.

"What's going on?" Apollo asked. He was out of breath, too.

Sheba said, "Boomer and Bojay are back."

"Sheba!" Apollo cried. "That's incredible news! Have they—"

"They're fine," she said. "But we've got to find that bomb!"

"Lords of Kobol," Apollo said. "Doctor Salik, we've got to evacuate everyone!"

"I got something," a security guard called. He was by the door, where a medtech's jacket lay carelessly thrown over a bench.

"That's my jacket," Cassi said slowly. As if time had frozen, Apollo looked over at her, realizing how the bomb had been planted.

"Okay, we've got to disarm it—I'm taking it our of sickbay, away from the patients. Bomb disposal teams One and Two, you know the drill."

He tore open the jacket, and the bomb—so small that bomb, how could so tiny a device threaten a battlestar like the *Galactica*? —he tore open the jacket and the bomb fell into his hand.

"Get it into the corridor! Three, four, clear the corridor of civilians, keep the area clear!"

The security team moved out of sickbay into the hall; when they were far enough to be just barely in earshot, the one who'd torn Cassi's jacket set the device carefully on the floor and two of this compatriots set to work disarming the thing.

"Look at it!" said the officer who'd been referred to as One. "A damnable Gemonese toy!"

"A trinket! A bloody jury-rigged Gemonese trinket, nothing to worry over."

"We've been searching the whole damned *Galactica* for a toy?!"

"Spare me these damned *Gemonese*!"

Sheba pushed past the security men who were trying to block the door to sickbay. She was walking toward the disposal team, stalking slowly but angrily.

"You!" she said. "One, Two—stop talking like a couple of fools and take your work seriously! The folks who made that bomb are sharper than you

want to think. If you don't pay close attention, you're going to get us all killed."

Two laughed. "Be serious, Colonel," she said. "It's just a toy! All I have to do is sever the timing wire, here, and it's dead."

He did not give her time to order him to stop before he cut the wire.

And blew the whole damned corridor to kingdom come.

The *Galactica* was designed to survive serious damage, of course.

The loss of thirty meters of the hull, of the corridor itself—that wasn't fatal. If sickbay had been deep in the center of the structure, or close to the Tylium core, and the core had been functional— that might have been a crippling blow. But in a very real sense the *Galactica* was already crippled; in this place, the loss of a large stretch of corridor was only an inconvenience.

The ship was designed as a matrix of chambers that seal on rupture; the moment that the blast began the safeties triggered, and doors all over the *Galactica* began to close. By the time Sheba was thrown into sickbay by the blast, the door had nearly sealed itself.

And then the blowback started; while the door was still sealing, the corridor had opened out to space, and it was sucking air out into the void, sucking both of the security men into the void—Sheba felt herself being sucked out, and she screamed.

And then a hand clasped around her wrist. And slowed her momentum just long enough for the door to finish sealing.

She fell to the floor, and looked up to see Apollo—she owed her life to Apollo.

And then the universe went black around her.

Apollo staggered, his ears ringing, eyes stinging and burning. He could sense the groans and cries all around him, but really couldn't hear them. The

smoke began to clear a little. Sheba lay crumpled on the floor; through the portal on the sickbay door he could see the void of space.

Desperately, he issued commands, then knelt beside Sheba.

She wasn't moving. Her body was covered in blood and burns. Half of her beautiful hair was gone. A white-faced Doctor Salik came trotting up, a medkit in his arms.

"Sheba!" Apollo cried.

But there was no response.

Dalton was cruising through the *Ur* cloud beside Troy and Trays, and to tell the truth, maybe she was just sectaredreaming, because it seemed like they'd been out in this blindness forever. She could hardly remember what they were doing out there for a moment.

Maybe she had drifted off, just briefly, because all at once she was thinking of sharing a kiss with Troy, just long and slow, and his arms were around her and—

"Dalton!" came Trays' voice. "You asleep at the comm?"

"No," she said, shaking her head free of the wild, crazy dreams, feeling suddenly guilty because she'd been thinking about Troy that way, and there was Trays, calling after her.

"Dalton, Trays, we've got to turn back. The fuel's at critical," Troy said, and that wasn't very romantic, either. Don't think about either of them that way, Dalton told herself.

"No!" she said. "Troy, we're at the edge of the cloud. I know it!"

"It's the same as it's always been," Troy said. "I know that we thought there was some change, but it's so crazy out here—"

"Maybe it was just a dream," she said. And all of a sudden she heard her father's voice. Starbuck's voice, like he was sitting in the cockpit with her. "Dalton, be strong," he said. "Don't give up."

That hurt. Because it was just Dalton wishing that Starbuck had said that. She was always chasing something. If she could only be the best pilot, prove to her father that she was…

"Yeah," Troy said. "Look, Boomer and Bojay are sure to be back by now. I know we're the only ones who've made it this far, but there's always another sectare. We've got to turn back. We can get back, retool, and—"

"Troy," Dalton said, shaking herself out of the sad feelings and the regret, forcing herself to be ready for anything. "They were almost out of food when we left. We don't know what's happened since we've been out of touch. We're their only hope. If we don't find a way out—"

"Yeah, don't wimp out," Trays said. "You afraid something bad's going to happen? Don't worry—I'm right here."

"I'm trying to use common sense, Trays," Troy snapped. Then he spoke to Dalton. "Look, sometimes we can't do everything," he told her. "The fuel's critical. Besides," he said, pausing for a micron. "Dalton!" he said, his voice full of alarm.

"What?" she asked.

"I can't get any readings here. There's… everything's gone crazy."

Dalton quickly checked her directionals. Troy was right. Soon, Trays joined in, having the same problem. One micron, the instruments told her that they were at the *Galactica's* coordinates, almost home, and the next, they were at the opposite side of the *Ur* cloud, parsecs beyond where they'd started.

"We're lost," she said.

"Boomer and Bojay know where we lost them," Troy said confidently. "All we have to do is wait."

"I wouldn't wait on them," Trays growled.

"Trays, stop it," Dalton said, remembering what her partner must have forgotten in his excitement. "We've been coasting more than we've been

using our drives. There's no ion trail for them to follow. Not any more."

"Oh, frack," Trays said. She heard him breathing heavily through the comm. "You're right. Now, what are we going to do?" he asked.

She thought of the words of Starbuck that she thought she'd heard: Be *strong. Don't give up*.

After a micron, she repeated the words to Troy. "We'll keep going," she said. "The Lords of Kobol wouldn't let us fail now."

"I hope you're right," Troy said. "I really hope that you're right."

"I'll trust in myself, if you don't mind," Trays said. But neither Dalton nor Troy paid much attention to him.

Starbuck caught up with Boomer and Bojay just as they were leaving the launch bay.

"Hey," he said, out of breath.

All three of them stopped and looked at Starbuck like he had just announced he was going to seal himself with Baltar and live forever as a happy couple.

Starbuck finally realized that his hand was coated in bright red blood, and he looked at them disarmingly. "Gar'Tokk," he said, trying to explain.

This still didn't have the desired effect. "Starbuck, you're dripping blood," Boomer said. "What in the stars happened?"

Starbuck wiped his hand on his leg, which only made things worse, because now his uniform was streaked with blood.

"I can't explain now," he said. "I'm not sure I could—I mean—some kind of crazy Noman ritual."

"Man!" Boomer exclaimed. "I knew we should have followed you."

"No," Starbuck said, shaking his head. Bojay pulled a bright pink strip of cloth from his pocket and handed it to Starbuck, who wrapped it around his hand.

"Thanks," Starbuck said. Then, pausing, he looked at the cloth, then back at Bojay. It was obviously from a woman's outfit, or at least—part of an outfit. "Where'd you get this?"

Bojay shrugged. "You're not the only one who gets around, Starbuck."

Compared to the crazy noman and Starbuck's bleeding hand, it sounded so ridiculous. Starbuck laughed, and in a moment all three of them were laughing.

When the laughter faded, Starbuck put his unhurt hand on Boomer's shoulder and looked into his friend's face.

"Boomer," he said. "I need you to give me every trace you had of Dalton, Troy and Trays. I'm going to go after them."

"Okay," Boomer said. "I'm ready when you are."

"Right now," Starbuck said.

"I'm going with you," Bojay said, pushing his way past Boomer.

Starbuck shook his head. "Not this time, buddy," he said. "If something happens, we can't afford to lose another of our best pilots."

"Starbuck, you can't go out there—"

"You just watch me," Starbuck said. "I'm going to find Dalton, if it's the last thing I do."

"Frack!" Tigh swore at his position at the bridge.

"What now?" Athena asked from the *Daedalus*.

"Sire Aron's on his way. He says that he argued and argued, but the Council is convinced that Apollo deliberately put Sheba in the way of that blast."

"Lords of Kobol," Athena said under her breath.

"Apollo's looking for the boy," Tigh told her.

"Thank the Lords—at least maybe he can find him before Jinkrat gets to the *Galactica* and discovers—"

"Discovers what, Athena?" A kindly voice echoed through the bridge. Sire Aron had arrived, backed by a squadron of blackshirted council security goons, twins to the one Koren had conquered with the help of those restraint cuffs.

"I let them through without announcing them. I'm sorry," a warrior said, who had been posted at the entry to the bridge.

"We welcome our Council member," Tigh said, thinking quickly.

A strange, uncertain look passed over Aron's face, but then he smiled.

"Where is Apollo?" Aron asked. "He has much to answer for. I have it on the authority of the security personnel that he is responsible for the damage to the ship, and Sheba's injuries."

"You do?" Athena asked from her screen, silencing a furious Tigh with a quick look of warning.

"What do you plan to do about Jinkrat's demands now?" Tigh interrupted. "The explosive was detonated and his son is still missing."

"We are still negotiating," Aron said. Then he shook his head, seeming to be full of grief. "This is a tragedy. But Apollo has led us into even more danger. I fear that the boy may be—"

He cut himself short, but even from her screen, Athena could see that he was implying that Koren could be dead.

"There's something not right about this," Tigh muttered under his breath to Athena.

"What was that, Tigh?" Aron asked.

"I said, we don't know where Apollo is," Tigh responded.

"Truly unfortunate," Aron said. "He must be found before Jinkrat arrives. I'm afraid I won't have good news for him, yet if Apollo can be questioned —"

"I'm not sure Apollo is the one who should be questioned," Tigh said cautiously.

Aron's brows raised, and he said, "Whatever do you mean, President Tigh?"

Athena surveyed the guards that she could see onscreen. A dozen, all heavily armed. And it was only Tigh, and the single warrior who'd been guarding the bridge.

Aron had begun to wander curiously around, touching control panels, making little satisfied noises to himself.

"Tigh," she whispered when Aron went out of sight.

"Yes, Athena?" he asked.

"We may be able to find Apollo," she said. "Perhaps he's with Baltar."

"Baltar!" Aron cried. "Of course!"

Immediately, he turned, sending half the security force away.

"But then again," Athena said.

Aron interrupted her. "It is of no matter. We will find him. And my security forces will quell this rebellion, which Apollo has been unable to control."

"I thought you were—friendly—with the rebel Jinkrat," Tigh said, stepping forward.

Aron smiled. "Of course!" he said. "I am dedicated to serving the people, and Jinkrat's people have been grievously injured by Apollo's selfish actions."

Tigh's face darkened. "Selfish?" he asked.

Athena broke in. "What do you mean about the rebellion?" she asked, her heart cold and full of apprehension, but trying to smile and convince the Council member that she was considering his qualifications as a leader.

"Apollo allowed this rebellion to occur," Aron said.

"By hoarding food, fuel and everything he could get his hands on. And— he's responsible for this violent attack, Sheba's injuries— and frankly, we have no way of knowing whether or not he kidnapped the boy."

"That's not true," Athena said quietly. "We've been doing—"

"I know what you've been doing," Aron said, interrupting her. Then, his expression suddenly changed, softening. He came close to the screen. Fighting back a shudder, she forced herself to look into the old man's eyes.

"Aron," she said.

He smiled at her, and Athena sensed something horrible behind his kindly face. Looking in his eyes, she had a premonition of evil that she could hardly believe. She forced herself to smile back. Causing problems at this point would only destroy all chances of Apollo finding Koren and speaking one-on-one with the rebel leader, putting a stop to the rebellion himself.

"Athena, I'm so sorry," Aron said. And all of a sudden, he was the kindly, older Council Leader again. "I can't see any other option. The fleet is in the worst situation it's ever been in. Apollo's days as a leader are over."

"When the truth comes out, you'll see things differently," Athena said. It was almost impossible to believe what she was hearing.

"We have learned many facts," Aron said. "All point to Apollo's complete abdication of leadership."

"Apollo would never—" Athena said.

"Please understand," Aron said. "Neither I nor the council blames you at all. In fact, we plan to name you as interim leader, — in command of both the *Galactica* and the *Daedalus*."

Athena bit her lip. "I am satisfied with my command."

"I can offer you much more opportunity than Apollo ever would," Aron said. "Well I remember how Adama always gave Apollo the lead. But you have proven yourself capable, Athena."

Athena shut her eyes, then opened them. "I know that I'm capable, Sire Aron," she said. "And so does Apollo."

Tigh looked on, his dark eyes wide with astonishment and disgust.

"Just think, Athena," Aron went on. "Two battlestars under your command."

Athena looked into his blue eyes, still shining bright in his aged face. How could this have happened?

"What about Jinkrat?" she asked. "Doesn't he have some—interests?"

"Well, of course," Aron said. "But he's just an unsophisticated… farmer. We will work with him, of course. However, that may not be possible if what I fear has happened and his son is dead. He's already—" But then Aron pulled himself short, smiling at Athena.

"I've said too much," he said.

Then, he turned to Tigh. "Please ground all Vipers as you were ordered centars ago. I am aware that patrols are still flying."

Tigh turned. Athena could see that he was issuing nothing more than a command to perform a routine systems check. But, she saw from looking over at Aron that his unfamiliarity with the bridge would help—at least for the time being.

"Would you like me to find Apollo?" she asked. "I believe I could track my brother down."

Aron turned back to her, smiling once more. "What a good idea, Athena! Yes, of course!"

And with that, he drew his cloak about his body and left, striding imperiously from the bridge, but leaving six security guards behind in his wake.

Athena and Tigh looked at each other. Now what would they do?

Chapter Seven

APOLLO COULDN'T get the image of Sheba, battered and torn, out of his mind. But he had to search even so. Jinkrat was within centons of reaching *Galactica*, and if he came and found that Koren was still missing, there was no telling what would happen.

Apollo ran through all the options. How many traitors were there, and traitors to whom?

Boomer and Bojay were looking for the boy, too. And everyone who had been on the bomb search squad. They'd find him, sooner or later.

Then Baltar's alarm went off.

By now, Apollo was getting used to it. But he had no time at all right now. He was searching the engineering deck. The blasted alarm! He checked it again—it was almost beyond belief. Baltar was headed for Apollo's special place: the Celestial Chamber.

"Boom," Apollo said over his comm. "Any sign around Bay Three?"

"Negative," came Boomer's voice. "We're still looking."

"He's little and tough," Apollo said. He took a deep breath. "And really smart. He could be anywhere."

"Gotcha, Commander," Boomer said. "I may not be little, but I'm not dumb."

"Me neither," came Bojay's wisecracking voice.

Apollo couldn't help but grin.

"You know you're a wanted man, right?" Boomer said. "We're supposed to track you down, too."

"Yeah," Apollo said in a heavy voice. "I know. Wanted—"

"Dead or alive!" Bojay said.

Boomer laughed, but Apollo didn't think it was all that funny.

"How's Sheba?" Bojay asked, his voice more serious.

"Don't know, Bojay. The doctor says she's hurt very badly."

"Frack," Bojay said.

"Look, I've got to go," Apollo said. "Check in if you find anything, and I mean anything. Boom, if that transport comes in with Jinkrat, stall it. Do anything. Create a diversion."

"My specialty," Boomer said.

Apollo hoped that Boomer was right. He'd just about run out of ideas, and Baltar's alarm was practically flying out of his pocket.

Torn, Apollo stood not far from the totally dead, black Tylium banks, looking around for any sign of Koren.

"Frack!" he swore, and set off in the direction of the Celestial Chamber. He had no idea where to look next, and he might as well search along the way to find Baltar and get him back under control.

"Do you know who I am?" the small man in the worn, dark blue cloak asked Koren.

Koren shook his head.

"You don't like Apollo much, do you?" the man asked.

Koren kept his distance. He was sure nobody would find him in this place up above *Galactica's* engines. It was like a big dome, right up there in space, almost like there was nothing between Koren and the *out there*. It was all white and milky-looking, nothing like what Koren imagined being right under the stars would be like.

He couldn't believe it, but the guy just walked right in like he owned the place, and he knew Koren was there. And Koren had been really sneaky. *Nobody* had seen him running away from the old man's quarters. He doubted that anybody had even found that guard, yet.

Every time he thought about it, he almost laughed. It had been so easy to trick him!

The only problem was, Koren had no idea where he really was on the *Galactica*, or how to work any of the equipment in this place—there was a lot of stuff there that looked like controls and dials and all kinds of things. He had to get a message to his dad, or get back home, somehow.

"Apollo killed my brother," Koren said.

"Yes," the newcomer said. He was about as old as that Sire Aron, but his hair was still pretty dark. His whole face was dark, and he had a weird-looking beard. Koren sized him up. He wasn't rich, that was for sure. His cloak was almost worn out. He looked like a refugee. And… he was in some kind of trouble, too. He had a security device around his ankle.

"Hey," Koren said, pointing at the man's ankle. "If you come over here, I can get that off of you."

The guy started laughing. "You can?" he asked.

"Sure! I just got out of Colonial restraints in about half a micron."

"Son, you're a boy after my own heart," the man said. He walked up to where Koren sat on a tall set of delicate metal stairs that went almost straight to the top of the chamber dome.

He stepped forward and offered his ankle. Koren set to work, tinkering with the restraint. It was really simple. From everything he'd heard, the Colonial Warriors were so high and mighty and so far ahead of all the civilians. But they just had bigger, fancier ships as far as Koren could see. Lasers were the same—maybe in a little better shape, maybe a little more powerful. But a baby could get out of these restraints they used!

Soon, the thing snapped off and lay on the floor, glowing red and making a high-pitched whine. Koren grimaced and leapt down from the stairs and smashed the thing with his boot.

"There!" Koren said. "It won't bother you any more. Who'd you rip off, anyway?"

"What?" the man asked.

"Who'd you steal from? What did you take?" Koren asked.

"Steal?" the man said.

Koren thought for a moment. "Yeah. You escaped, just like me. I can tell you don't have any money and you're no Colonial Warrior. So I figured that —"

"I didn't steal," the man said.

Koren drew in a sharp breath. "Did you… kill somebody?"

"Yes," the man said, his eyes glittering dangerously.

Koren backed off. "Wow," he said. "I hope it was a Cylon. But then if you killed a—"

"They wouldn't put me in jail for that, would they?" the man said, keeping up his scary expression.

Koren gave the man another long look. He was scary, but he looked sad, too. He was putting on an act, pretending to be dangerous. And he wasn't all that young, either. Koren could outrun him in a micron.

Koren leaned against one of the old-fashioned control banks and the man sat on the stairs, right where Koren had been microns before.

"No," Koren said. "They wouldn't put you in jail for that. What's your name?" he asked.

"What's yours?" the man countered.

"You tell first," Koren said.

The man smiled, but it wasn't very friendly. "Do you really want to know?"

"I wouldn't have asked if I didn't!" Koren said. Now he was getting irritated.

"Count Baltar, formerly of the—"

"Oh, frack!" Koren cried, scrambling to his feet.

Only to find an amazingly strong arm grabbing him before he could get to the relative safety of one of the giant consoles. Koren thrashed as he was whipped around and he saw those shining, deep set dark eyes up close.

"Frightened now, young man?" Baltar asked. "As well you should be. Now go over there where you were and sit and wait. I'm expecting a visitor—right about—"

Apollo burst into the Celestial Chamber.

"Now," Baltar said.

"Koren!" Apollo said, running to the boy. He didn't notice Baltar's security device lying useless on the floor.

"Leave me alone!" Koren cried, trying to scramble away. But he was caught between Baltar and Apollo, and no matter how he squirmed, he couldn't get away.

"Calm down," Apollo said. "It's all right. I'm not here to hurt you. I'm here to—"

Apollo yelled as Koren bit down on his hand.

He sprang back, and Baltar took over, grabbing the boy's shoulders.

"He's telling the truth, Koren," Baltar said. "We just want to help you."

Koren looked at Baltar like he was insane.

Apollo held his injured hand and looked at the boy, torn between relief and total frustration.

"I'm going to take you to your father," Apollo said. "He's probably already here."

"My dad!" Koren said. Baltar held him tight, looking steadily in Apollo's eyes.

"Baltar, how did you know he'd be here? How did you know that—"

"I have my ways," Baltar said enigmatically.

"Well if you knew," Apollo said, "Why didn't you contact me, Tigh, Athena… anybody?"

"And I suppose prisoners are allowed communicators?" Baltar said in a petulant tone.

Apollo threw up his hands. "Baltar!"

Baltar grinned his wolf-like grin. "I did have a very reliable device to communicate with you, Apollo." He held up his now-bare ankle.

"Where did—"

Baltar looked toward the broken tracking anklet, then back at Koren.

"Koren," Apollo said. "Did you do that?"

Baltar answered for the boy. "He most certainly did, Apollo. He is a very talented child."

Shaking his head, Apollo approached Koren with caution. "Koren," he said. "I found that guard in Sire Aron's quarters. You have to tell me what happened."

Koren shook his head, his lips closed in a thin line.

"I mean it," Apollo said, frustration boiling over. "You've got to tell the truth. Your dad's on the way here, and a lot of people are going to die if the

truth doesn't come out. What happened back there? How did you get out of sickbay and how did you come here?"

Koren looked at Apollo, his eyes narrow and full of suspicion.

"I'll tell what happened after I see my dad," he said.

And that was all he would say. Even fierce looks from Baltar couldn't get any more information out of him.

"So now we walk together again, Apollo," Baltar said. "But I fear it is you who is branded traitor this time, not me."

"Baltar," Apollo growled. He led both of them toward the Council Chambers at the end of his laser pistol. Koren could bolt at any moment. And so could Baltar!

As the grim trio approached the Council Chambers, Iblis watched. He had been watching the rebellion against cursed Apollo by means of his ansible as it proceeded with unbelievable swiftness.

Iblis could hardly contain his glee when he saw Sheba fall. He was even more pleased when the Council turned on Apollo, and when Jinkrat's forces grew.

And it was as if the real traitor was Iblis' own son, although Iblis had other plans—for *that*. It made everything so much easier—so much *simpler*.

As Apollo, the boy and Baltar neared the Council Chamber, and Jinkrat broke through Boomer's hopeless "diversion," heading on his collision course with them, Iblis rubbed his imaginary hands together and snorted.

And laughed.

The rebel Jinkrat had no idea how his high ideas were being used to serve Iblis' needs. Apollo leading that sniveling brat and that weak, foolish liar Baltar!

Few had seen Iblis before he had lost his natural form, and fewer still had lived to tell of it. Iblis had nearly killed Apollo, only foiled at the last

micron by the cursed humans uniting. Of the humans, few had seen his true appearance, and one was Sheba, curse her—she had fallen away from his grasp before he could destroy her as well. But now—well, now this rebellion had done it for him!

And then there was Baltar to consider, Iblis thought. That cowardly, traitorous, selfish, greedy, foolish mortal—a creature who could not be any more after Iblis' own black heart than if he was the demon's own son.

Baltar! Because of the peculiar nature of this place, Iblis had no direct control over any other living mind. And Baltar, out of reach of Iblis's tentacles of thought for the first time in yahrens, had almost immediately gone weak and soft. Iblis would deal with him when the time came, and in his own very special way. Whatever his foolish plans were, they'd come to nothing. Baltar was a nothing. His life was done.

As for now, Baltar was as yet only dimly aware of Iblis' plans, like a child vaguely comprehends when he's in trouble, but isn't quite sure what he did wrong, or what his parents intended to mete out as punishment.

The blasted Chitain had forced Iblis into the *Ur* cloud, cutting off Iblis's direct influence on his living minions, like Baltar. But the humans were tearing themselves apart, with Iblis required to do nothing but sit back, watch, and enjoy the show.

Iblis, looking through his ansible at a hangdog Baltar, walking at the end of Apollo's laser, laughed long and loud.

"You're afraid, aren't you?" he said, even though Baltar could not hear him or answer. "If you knew what I had planned, you'd wish you'd never been born."

Of course, Iblis being what he was—an inhuman, evil, inscrutable demon with no conscience and no soul—couldn't know that what he said was absolutely true. Baltar was sorry that he had ever been born. He was sorry for a lot of things. And full of deep remorse and bitter regret. For all his evil, Baltar was a man, and that meant he could never forsake the heritage of his birth: the good and the bad that dwells in every human heart.

And this, Iblis would never comprehend. And so, in all his evil plotting, he was happy the way ignorant children are happy, because despite his vast, cosmic powers, Iblis had no soul. When he ceased to exist, he would truly be no more. And that, perhaps, is why Iblis was so very, very angry.

Chapter Eight

IT WASN'T leading Baltar and Koren toward the Council Chambers that so bothered Apollo. It was the faces—the filthy, haggard faces of the refugees crammed into the *Galactica* that were so bad. Koren looked around, and he'd started to cry.

"Koren, we're almost there," Apollo said.

Baltar even had a few kind words for the boy.

It looked like Hades. This was what had become Of the people of the fleet. Clothes ragged, some people wandering around as though they'd lost their minds.

All of them looking at Apollo with pure hate in their eyes. Blaming him for their pain and their suffering. Maybe they were right, Apollo thought.

But Apollo hadn't planted that bomb. Jinkrat had. Apollo hadn't kidnapped Koren, either.

They were almost there. But there were so many people crowding around. They were hoping to speak to the Council, Apollo realized. They wanted food, medicine—anything.

"So, come to take your punishment!" an old woman cried. "Now it's time for you to suffer, Apollo!"

Everyone cheered.

Apollo grimaced and pushed forward. Baltar glared around, and his hard looks silenced many.

They entered the Council Chambers.

Where a sad-faced Sire Aron greeted them.

"Koren!" he cried. "I was so worried about you."

Koren stood silent.

Apollo looked sharply at the boy, then back at Sire Aron.

"We were all worried," Apollo said. "I have to ask you right now. There was a guard in—"

"Yes, rebel activity is everywhere," Aron said quickly. "But Apollo, the boy's father approaches. We have just had—"

The Council doors opened again, and in strode Jinkrat and a small party of his men, hard-faced and raggedly clothed, but heavily armed.

"Dad!" Koren cried, running to his father.

For the first time, Apollo set eyes on his enemy, the rebel leader Jinkrat.

Though Apollo knew that the man could not be any older than he was, Jinkrat looked far older than his yahrens. The care of untold trouble marked his face. A scar on his cheek twisted vivid red. The man's eyes burned brightly. With rage and hatred, Apollo saw. Well—Apollo had something for Jinkrat, too. Something for the sake of Sheba.

Koren buried his face in Jinkrat's tunic. "Dad! Dad!" he cried.

Even though Koren was a boy that Apollo had known only for a short time, his enthusiastic reaction stabbed into Apollo with a brief, unexpected pain. It didn't make sense, Apollo thought. Why should it bother him so much that the boy would run to his father like that? Koren wasn't a colonial warrior. He was no part of Apollo's world or family. Even so—it hurt. Then Apollo realized. Boxey was full-grown now. And even Dalton, who Apollo had practically raised, even Dalton thought of Starbuck first. No matter what Apollo had and how much Jinkrat lacked, he still had this. His son.

Jinkrat looked beyond his son's shoulders, stroking the boy's head. He said nothing to Apollo, instead looking toward his armed rebel guards.

"Don't leave," he told them.

They formed ranks behind Jinkrat, who turned to Council Member Aron. "I must thank you for this, fulfilling your promise," he said.

"You are welcome," Aron said. "You will see that all the words we speak in the Council are true."

Apollo stared at Aron in amazement.

Then Baltar stepped forward.

"You do not know me," he said to Jinkrat, "But Apollo is the one who found your son. Or, rather—I did."

"Baltar, you are unwanted in these chambers," Aron said, his voice suddenly full of command. "Your very presence soils them."

Apollo watched Baltar's eyes narrow dangerously, but Baltar said nothing.

"Baltar," Apollo said quickly. "I know I'm a fool to trust you, but find Tigh. Tell him what's—"

"You must speak openly here in the Council, Apollo. You are brought here on very serious charges," Sire Aron said.

Apollo turned to face the council.

"In fact, you must give your weapon to the guards," Aron continued.

Apollo noticed Baltar slipping out, but it didn't seem as though anyone else paid any attention. Reluctantly, he turned his laser over to one of the blackshirted guards. Then he looked once more at Jinkrat.

With a single nod, Jinkrat commanded all of his guards to silence and they ordered themselves in a tight array. This was the right of command, Apollo realized.

A man who earned such loyalty from his men was not a man to be treated lightly. He had similar loyalty from Koren, Apollo saw, as the boy reached up and began to speak quickly to his father.

"Dad, please listen," Koren said.

"You have been prisoner of this man," Jinkrat said, still holding Apollo in an implacable, cold gaze.

"No, Dad," Koren said. "Apollo brought me here. Please, Dad—"

Apollo watched. The boy had been honest. He hadn't spoken a word before, but now he was talking.

"Wait!" Aron cried, stepping forward. "The boy must be seen to—look, there's blood on his face."

And there was blood. Apollo knew that Koren was uninjured, but as he stepped forward Jinkrat's guards closed ranks and he couldn't get any closer.

"He's unharmed," Apollo said.

"We'll let the doctor be the judge of that," Aron said.

Jinkrat leaned close to his son, putting his finger under his chin.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Koren nodded.

"He can be treated later. Now, we must talk of this… situation," Jinkrat said.

"I do not agree," Aron said. "I believe the boy should be taken directly to sickbay."

So you could kidnap him again, Apollo thought. But he waited for Jinkrat to answer.

Jinkrat's face changed, softening as he looked down at his son. "Koren, you're still a boy. You don't understand how men can lie and betray each other. I'd rather you—"

"I want to stay, dad," Koren said. "I'm not too young to understand."

"Koren, please step aside," Jinkrat said. "Wait for this man and I to say what must be said between us." Jinkrat took Koren's shoulder and led him to a chair on the side of the room. "Stay there," he commanded.

Apollo watched the conflicting emotions play over Koren's pale, freckled face, and watched respect for his father emerge, victorious. Koren sat, pulling up his legs and looking on with an agonized expression, his hands balled tight, gripping the arms of the chair.

Jinkrat turned back to face Apollo. Apollo sensed that the man was like a spring, compressed to its tightest point, coiled and ready to break loose at any micron.

"So," Jinkrat said. "You uphold this one small part of your bargain. Did you hope to kill me while my son looked on, Apollo?"

"No!" Apollo cried. "What were you trying to accomplish with that bomb? In sickbay? How many innocents would have been killed then, if not for—"

"What lies are these?" Jinkrat asked. "Sickbay? I planted no—"

"Sheba is lying near death right now. Dozens more could have died if not for her bravery," Apollo said, feeling the blood rushing to his head. Jinkrat was not a big man—not physically large. Apollo knew that he could take him in a micron. If he had to.

"I know who Sheba is," Jinkrat said. "Daughter of Cain, the great warrior. A warrior herself, high above me. She risked her life willingly. I have no—"

"Of course not," Apollo cried. "You only care about yourself, about your selfish need for revenge. Koren told me about your son." Then, Apollo caught himself short, reminding himself—thinking his rage was not so very different from Jinkrat's own deep anger. They had both lost people they cared about, deeply. There had been so many who had died. So many years of war and blood and pain.

"Is my son of any less worth than your high born people, Apollo?" Jinkrat asked. But his voice was no longer angry. It was cold, full of bitterness and resentment.

"Listen," Apollo said. "We've all had to sacrifice—more than anybody could ever have imagined. But you don't understand, Jinkrat."

Neither of the two noticed that Sire Aron had moved far away across the chamber. In their rage, the room had shrunk to a tiny space that only the two of them inhabited. The Council Members stared, struck in awe and fear.

The rebellion had come to them.

"You did," Jinkrat said. "You've told your lies for years, Apollo. You and your father before you. Everything for the good of the fleet, for the sake of your precious mission. Meanwhile, all the others there behind you mattered nothing. We could give up everything so you could be comfortable, not hungry, warm, have fuel for your Vipers while children starved and mothers watched their children die!"

"No!" Apollo cried. But he remembered all those choices—the ships he'd ordered scuttled. The refugees, dying without any air. Even Starbuck couldn't have saved them. He had chosen the warriors over the ordinary civilians. But he'd had no choice!

"You would never have even known my name if I hadn't stepped forward," Jinkrat said. "You were too busy to even talk to me."

"What?" Apollo said, rushing forward.

"Yes," Jinkrat said. "I didn't want to say this with my son here to hear it, but he might as well hear the truth now. I can see that Koren has been affected by the excitement and the power held on the *Galactica*. You're not poor, simple people like we are."

Apollo had heard enough. "There's no one better than any other person on the fleet," he said, feeling his fists clenching and blood rushing to his cheeks.

"Dad, stop!" Koren cried, starting to climb out of his seat.

Jinkrat hushed Koren with a single stern glance. "Koren, I don't want you to be hurt by this, but I must tell this man what he's done. Make him

understand."

"Understand what, Jinkrat?" Apollo demanded. "That you want to take control—take over by force?"

"Understand," Jinkrat said, "How we feel. The faceless ones, out here on these ships, crowded, dirty, starving and dying. There's no communion with the Lords of Kobol and the great mysteries for us. We lost our homes when the Cylons invaded—we followed because we had to follow. Koren needs to understand what a boy like him means to a great man like you. Commander Apollo, son of Adama. Koren needs to know the face that lies beneath the mask!"

"Jinkrat!" Apollo cried, leaping forward. Koren was on his feet then, and he put his small body between the two enraged men. That was all that kept Apollo from tearing Jinkrat to pieces at that moment, and it was a very small thing, only twelve yahrens old, his head barely up to Apollo's chest.

"I'm not a great man like you," Jinkrat said, his voice suddenly heavy with emotion. "I have no great name. I am heir to no great house. Koren is my son and my heir. Thanks to you, he's all that I'll ever have, and I'll do anything to keep him from harm. But if not for fate, Apollo, you would never have even known my boy's name. He would have just been another of the faceless, the nameless, dying and suffering in service of your endless wars and destruction!"

"What was Sheba to you, then, when you put that bomb in the *Galactica* sickbay?" Apollo countered.

"Enough of your lies!" Jinkrat cried. "I can see there's no hope!"

Koren desperately tried to keep the two men apart, but he was far too small. With a cry, Koren fell to the floor and Apollo leapt over him, his hands clutching at Jinkrat's worn tunic.

The Chamber was in an uproar, but neither man heard it. Jinkrat's guards leapt forward, but he snarled at them to keep back.

"We fight man to man!" he cried.

They closed. Jinkrat threw a glancing blow that hit Apollo's cheek, but Apollo barely felt it. Apollo crouched and landed a crushing right in Jinkrat's midsection, feeling his fist sink satisfyingly into the rebel's flesh. That was for Sheba! Apollo, as fast as a laser, brought up his knee into Jinkrat's chin, and the rebel groaned. All that was keeping Jinkrat on his feet now was Apollo, who had Jinkrat's collar twisted in his left hand and began pounding Jinkrat's head with rapid, sharp blows, feeling the flesh pulp under each blow, as sharp, stinging hot pain lanced into his knuckles, but again, Apollo was in a red-filmed rage and couldn't register the damage he was doing to himself, much less how much he was doing to Jinkrat other than giving him a blow for each betrayal he'd endured with this rebellion. It wasn't just the bomb, it wasn't the trouble, it was the way everything was falling apart. Athena and Starbuck, acting like fools. And Cassi. Cassi and Starbuck. Like she didn't care for a moment about Apollo. And Sheba—Apollo's one true friend—Apollo didn't even know if she'd live or die.

"That's for Sheba!" Apollo cried, with one great, thundering blow that splintered the bridge of Jinkrat's nose. Blood spurted out, brilliant red and shining.

As if from a far distance, Apollo heard a small voice crying, "Stop! Stop!" Then something grabbed his shoulders and he felt a weight on his back.

He turned, yelling, and raised his fist. His knuckles were split and bloody, a bare inch from Koren's tearstained face.

"Apollo, stop! You're killing my dad!"

Like he was being sucked backward down a Viper launch tube, Apollo's vision came to a pinpoint, and the anger left him as quickly as it came. Stunned, he let go of Jinkrat's collar and watched the man slump to the floor.

"Dad!" Koren cried, bending close to his father. Jinkrat groaned, and turned his head.

Apollo could see that he hadn't killed him, but the beating made what he'd done to Starbuck look like a few mild love pats. He'd beaten Jinkrat badly

—the man would need medical care, and fast.

"Koren," Jinkrat said, his mouth full of blood. His arm jerked out, drawing the boy close.

"Oh, Lords of Kobol," Apollo said, staggering back. "Koren, I'm—"

"Dad!" Koren cried, struggling with his sleeve to wipe some of the blood from Jinkrat's face.

Jinkrat struggled to sit up, then with Koren's help, was on his feet again. Battered and bloody, his eyes still burned. Apollo could barely look at him, and he couldn't look at Koren at all, whose face was red with fear and hurt, streaked with tears and now with his father's own blood.

"Now, see what kind of man Apollo is!" Sire Aron cried, stepping forward.

"Get back," Jinkrat said, waving his arm. "Let us settle this."

Apollo looked down at the beaten rebel, and at Koren. No matter what had happened, there was no way that Jinkrat was the traitor. He was full of rage and fury, but… would Apollo have felt any different?

"You're just trying to save your people," Apollo said slowly. "So am I."

"You've got a hell of a way of showing it," Jinkrat said.

Apollo looked up into the faces of the guards, who were about to kill him. He was weaponless. All that stood between him and them was Jinkrat. Aron hovered nearby, his face full of alarm and concern.

"Stop!" he cried. The Council Members huddled, pointing and muttering, like frightened birds.

Jinkrat was on his feet, facing Apollo. "I did not put that bomb in the sickbay," Jinkrat said. "I ordered that it be placed above the engine chamber, where it would disable the *Galactica*, but injure no people, save for an accidental mishap."

Apollo looked at the injured rebel leader. "It was in sickbay," he said. "In Cassiopeia's jacket. Surely you remember her. She was the one—"

"Yes," Jinkrat said. "I remember her. I entrusted Koren to her. I would never have put her in such danger! Nor the people in your sickbay. I knew that was where she would take Koren. Surely, even with your prejudiced eyes, you could see that I would not put the bomb where my own son was!"

Apollo drew in a quick breath. "No," he said. "I don't think that you would."

The Council exploded with questions. Aron went back to them, trying to calm them.

"My goal was not for more people to die," Jinkrat said. "I want everyone—high and low—to live."

"That is my goal too, Jinkrat," Apollo said. He thought again of those choices he made. A man sometimes has to make terrible choices. What had Gar'Tokk said in that conversation that had seemed like yahrens before, even though it was only a short time before? There is no dishonor in that. Even Baltar had spoken of choices.

"I think I—understand—why you made some of the choices you did, Apollo," Jinkrat said, slowly. "I cannot say what I would have done in your place. Even in the battle, Apollo. I understand why no medical help could be sent for my son. We prayed. It was all we could do."

"That has been all any of us could do at times," Apollo said. The anger seemed to have left Jinkrat as well, and the man's eyes were full of grief.

"But I still don't understand," Jinkrat said. "Why did you take the food and fuel that Council member Aron was sending to us? This was why I issued that ultimatum. Why I—"

"I did not," Apollo said. "We don't know where the barge has gone. There are traitors in our midst, everywhere."

"Aron said that you were holding it. For your own use, and that of the warriors," Jinkrat said, but the suspicion in his voice was almost gone.

"Never," Apollo said in a firm voice. "You have been betrayed, Jinkrat, but not by me."

Jinkrat nodded. "I fear that you have been betrayed as well, Apollo."

The Chamber was now almost totally silent. All eyes were on Jinkrat and Apollo.

Jinkrat was the one who moved first, stepping haltingly toward Apollo and offering his hand.

"We may not be friends, Apollo, but I believe that you are an honest man," he said.

Apollo extended his hand and took the hand of the rebel leader.

"Dad!" Koren cried. Stiffly, Jinkrat accepted Apollo's brief embrace. As he did, he looked down at Koren, shaking his head.

"Maybe we should have let you speak first, Koren," Apollo said. "You promised that you'd tell what happened to you once you saw your dad."

"I may only be twelve yahrens, but I'm not dumb!" Koren cried.

Jinkrat and Apollo laughed. Apollo reached over and ruffled Koren's hair.

Then, the two men parted.

Neither of them saw Aron moving away from the Council Members. Apollo was not looking at the array of guards behind Jinkrat.

"We must talk, Apollo," Jinkrat said. "Our needs are still unmet. Even though there is a traitor—"

Then, Jinkrat's brow wrinkled and he turned, as if he heard something that the others could not hear. Apollo watched his face change, grow suddenly alarmed.

Apollo couldn't understand what he was looking at. One of Jinkrat's men had a laser rifle, and it was pointed at…

"No!" Apollo cried.

Blackshirted Council guards rushed forward, but they were too slow. Apollo was too slow.

He felt Koren's small body hitting his.

He watched Jinkrat crumple. And fall.

Apollo grabbed Koren, trying to protect him.

The guards' lasers flashed. The assassin fell. Then it was pandemonium, Jinkrat's remaining guards struggling with the blackshirts.

"He's dead!" someone cried.

Not Koren, Apollo thought. Please let it not be Koren.

"Jinkrat's dead!" came another voice.

Apollo's heart sank.

He felt arms shoving him. Koren was ripped from his arms.

"You murdered him!" someone yelled.

He watched the form of Jinkrat being carried away. "Space junk!" one of his men cried. "That's all Jinkrat ever was to any of *them*."

Apollo heard someone say that Koren was still breathing.

"Get him to sickbay!" Apollo cried.

But six blackshirted guards grabbed him and held him back. One of them rammed the butt of a rifle hard into Apollo's back and he fell to his knees.

He looked up into the face of Sire Aron.

"Apollo, I cannot believe this," Aron said.

"Neither can I," Apollo said through his pain.

"I was so afraid that something might happen. But the guards were unable to stop this treachery. Too late," he said in a grief-stricken voice, turning to the other council members. "We are so sadly, too late."

"I was too late," Apollo said, in shock. Jinkrat was dead. Koren, maybe mortally wounded.

"You must be taken to the brig," Aron said. "Guards, escort Apollo to a holding cell. The Council will reconvene in two centons to try Apollo—"

"For what?" Apollo said.

"For the murder of Jinkrat," Aron said softly. "And may the Lords of Kobol have mercy on your soul. For the people will have none."

All Apollo could do was stare in stunned silence.

"I'm sorry," Aron said, as the guards shoved Apollo out of the Council Chambers.

As Apollo exited the Council Chambers guarded by a dozen blackshirted council guards, Baltar emerged from the shadows.

"Apollo, how did this happen?" Baltar asked.

"I—don't know—" Apollo said. His head was still reeling.

Baltar looked sadly back at the chamber and the remnants of Jinkrat's guards, who were lingering, as much in shock as Apollo was. "There's more to be seen here than meets the eye," he said.

"But I'm afraid there's not much time to discuss it. Some people are on the way, and they're rather angry."

He looked over at the doors, and barely had enough time to get his back to the wall as the mob burst into the corridor.

"We saw it all!" cried a man in the lead.

"It was on IFB—we saw Apollo's traitor kill Jinkrat!"

And they rushed forward, waving bent pipes and chair legs, heading straight for Apollo and Baltar. The Council guards sidled away. With the mob in the mood they were in, the Council troops weren't any safer than Apollo and Baltar.

"Kill Apollo!" one of them cried.

Then another figure stepped from the shadows. Gar'Tokk! He moved in front of Apollo and Baltar, ignoring the cowardly guards, and spread his arms wide. "No!" he cried, in a voice so loud that it filled even the sound-muffled bay.

"He killed Jinkrat," someone whined.

"You have laws," the Noman intoned. "You must obey them."

"That's right," Sire Aron said, choosing this moment to make a dramatic entry. "We already planned a tribunal for Apollo's betrayals of the fleet. It will continue. With the charge of murder added!"

Apollo put his hand to his head. Suddenly it was aching and throbbing, and the corridor was spinning.

Baltar caught him under the shoulders and held him steady. "Apollo, I can't give you up like this," Baltar whispered.

"You've got to," Apollo told Baltar, amazed that the old traitor had suddenly turned into Apollo's last friend, save Gar'Tokk. "I don't know what came over me, but—"

"You will be tried for crimes against the *Galactica*. Treason—and now, even murder!" Sire Aron's face was grim, his words hung in the air.

The mob rustled and shifted.

"All right," someone said at last. "The Noman's right. We got laws. We got to obey them."

"Yeah," someone else said.

The Council security guards, filled with new courage, pushed their way forward through the crowd.

"Take Apollo to the brig," Sire Aron ordered them. "Hold him until we call him to come before us again and stand trial."

Without resisting, Apollo went with them, hanging his head in shock and shame. Baltar looked at him with an expression of sympathy. Somehow, that only made Apollo feel worse.

Even if he had said anything, no one could have heard it, because the crowd's roar had reached a deafening pitch.

As the Security guards forced their way through the crowd, with Gar'Tokk and Baltar allowed to walk by Apollo's side, it seemed to Apollo that every civilian on board the *Galactica* had found something to wield, from chair legs to lengths of shining metal pipe to pieces of brass railing that Apollo recognized—only centars earlier they had adorned the Forward bar. In their varied clothing, from richly decorated cloaks to simple, rough brown tunics, from elderly wives to scantily-clothed socialators, every man and woman on the *Galactica* seemed to be crowded around, eager to kill him. And they were all screaming.

Apollo couldn't breathe for a micron. The faces of the mob were gasping, panting, and shrieking, some pale and others bright red from the exertion, and each had glazed, unseeing eyes that seemed almost blind, although Apollo knew that was impossible. Somewhere, behind the front group, Apollo knew that others must be getting crushed, pushed, and trampled, but he couldn't see that. He could only see the few leaders clearly, and they were bearing down on the guards and Apollo with the speed and singlemindness of a Cylon fighter wing going in for the kill.

One of the Security guards fired his laser, a brief burst of bright blue that exploded over the heads of the leaders. Sparks flew down harmlessly from the ceiling, but like an animal at bay, the mob paused, then stopped a moment.

Apollo watched, amazed, as the leaders slid forward, not walked, but slid, as they were pushed by the sheer momentum of the numbers behind them.

There were still shrieks and groans, but this time, they weren't of mob rage, but of pain and fear, both from the laser discharge, and from the pressure of that many bodies crammed into the narrow space of the corridor.

There had to be hundreds of them! Thousands!

"There's only a few of them!" cried one of the men in front. "Come on—they can't hold out long."

"They've got lasers," another man cried. "Don't be a fool!"

Aron, bringing up the rear, called out, "Stop! Let us pass!"

The groans and cries continued from within the mob. "Somebody's already hurt," a woman's voice said.

"I'm hurt!" said another voice, perhaps that of a young man or boy.

"Listen to me," Apollo said. "This is no way to act. Go back to your quarters. Go back to the—"

"Why should we listen to you?" came a voice from the mob. Soon, others echoed the complaint.

"It's not safe," Apollo said. "You'll be injured."

"We're taking him through!" one of the guards bellowed.

"He'll be put on trial," came Sire Aron's elderly voice.

"I am sworn to protect him," Gar'Tokk cried at last, holding out his long, strong arms. "Now, go back to your quarters and disburse. Unless you care to face me!"

No one cared to face the Noman. At last, the mob parted.

Keeping his expression neutral, Apollo controlled his breathing and even tried to smile at the mob as the people parted to allow them through. And

they did part. As he passed, Apollo noticed that many people had no weapons at all. They were just there, following.

Some seemed confused, in fact. A few people smiled at him, but most faces were hostile and furious, full of hatred and resentment.

"You'll be put to death," a woman said in a voice dripping with poison.

Apollo didn't respond, but her words and the cruel expression on her face struck him in the heart. He began to wonder if the *Galactica* had become a lunatic asylum, with all the inmates on the loose.

Somehow, in the press of bodies, Baltar moved close.

Apollo could not believe that Baltar was there, risking that kind of danger, all to walk at Apollo's side. He looked over at Baltar, stunned.

"Remember what I said," Baltar told Apollo in a low voice, his dark face scanning the crowd constantly. Apollo couldn't stop, because if he did, that would break the spell that Gar'Tokk had precariously woven that was holding the crowd back. The small Security force wouldn't hold them for a second. Hearing Aron's rough breathing, he could tell that the old man was even afraid. Another brief glance at Baltar was all Apollo could afford.

Baltar's face was easy to read, and Apollo realized in sudden alarm what should have been obvious to him from the start. They could all die at any moment. But that was just one of the many differences between Baltar and Apollo. While Apollo had never entertained this particular fear in his life, Baltar had feared a knife in the back for yahrens upon yahrens.

All at once, Apollo was suddenly grateful that Baltar was at his side, for all of his glowering, brooding looks and baleful presence. Baltar was ever suspicious, and there wasn't a better person to watch Apollo's back in the middle of the confused, but still enraged mob of Colonial civilians.

Finally, they were nearing the end of the crowd, and Apollo's heart sank to see that here in the back were the oldest, the slowest, and the youngest. Yes, there were children, some from families so poor that they had only the thinnest of tunics to wear, and flimsy sandals on their feet. There were dirty

faces and wrinkled ones. Bent backs and white heads surrounded him. When he looked into their eyes Apollo did not see hatred; he saw fear.

But also, among both young and old, among these last stragglers, he saw something that strengthened his resolve. On the faces of these, the least of the people of *Galactica*, he saw glimmers of hope. There had been no knife in Apollo's back. But Baltar hadn't been wrong to be so fearful. Apollo had seen more than a few faces darkened in a killing rage.

"Take care, Apollo," said a very old man who leaned on a cane, standing at the very end of the mob, almost as if he'd hobbled along so far behind that he had only just reached the dreadful scene.

"Thank you, Father," Apollo said, using the old-fashioned form of address.

The old man's smile carried Apollo all the way to the brig.

"Remember," Baltar said. And then he touched his chest. Apollo paused, staring at Baltar in wonder. Baltar didn't have anything in there but a piece of withered, evil coal. What was he pointing at?

His false, lying, evil heart? Shaking his head, Apollo turned away, and went on to face his fate in the brig.

Apollo sat on the cot in his cell, staring at the four walls, wondering how Baltar had stood it all those yahrens. The many prisoners the cell had held had left their marks. Names, here and there—Starjumper, Orgon, and a really prolific artist named Michelangelo who covered the walls with pictures of winged creatures and Vipers in flight pursued by Cylon fighters.

One of the guards opened the tiny window in the cell door. "Visitor," he announced.

The door opened. Shadowed in the light, Apollo saw a lovely form. It was Athena.

She ran to him and they embraced. Apollo held his sister tightly, grateful to see her, glad for the small contact with her. It might be the last time, he

thought, but as she drew away, he saw that she was deeply troubled, and there were many feelings playing over her beautiful face.

"Apollo, I'm so glad you're all right," she said. He led her to the cot, and they sat next to each other.

"Athena," he said again, overcome by emotion.

Then she sighed, and touched his cheek gently. "Apollo," she said. "I saw the tape."

Apollo looked away. "I don't know what happened," he said. "He made me so angry. I couldn't stop hitting him. It was the most insane thing."

"But Apollo, he was greeting you—offering peace! How could you attack him?" she asked.

Apollo turned back, his eyes wide. "Greeting me?" he said.

"Apollo! Koren was right there—you two shook hands. Then, you attacked him, and suddenly you crouched. As if you knew that man was going to assassinate him! Why, Apollo?"

"Athena, that's not what happened," Apollo said. "I shouldn't have beaten him like that, but he wasn't greeting me—he accused me of terrible things. He said I didn't care about the people. Said that I was taking the fuel and food and lying—"

Athena shook her head. "Apollo, I saw it all—they broadcast a tape."

"Athena," Apollo said, taking her hands. "I know this is going to sound crazy, but that's not what happened. It wasn't what he said, and it wasn't what happened."

Athena looked completely torn between what she had seen and what Apollo was telling her. "I don't know," she said in an uncertain voice. "That tape—Koren was right there and you let that man fire. A child, Apollo!"

Apollo shook his head. He was still stunned after all that had happened. And it was like his mind was drifting away. He couldn't concentrate. Maybe

Jinkrat had been right—the first time. Maybe Apollo really didn't care about anyone. Where had his caring gotten everybody? They were starving, ships falling apart, people suffocating—

He leaned back on the cot and felt his mind drifting away.

"That's not what happened, Athena."

"They're saying that only you could have done it, Apollo," Athena said. "You were there—you let that man shoot Jinkrat."

"We… we had to fight, Athena," Apollo said. "Man to man. I did make peace with Jinkrat, but not the way you seem to have seen. Aron must have —"

"How could someone doctor the tape?" Athena asked. "Maybe—Baltar!" she cried.

Apollo shook his head. "Baltar walked the mob with me. He watched my back. With GarTokk."

"Gar'Tokk!" Athena cried. "He's been missing for a long time. People are suspicious. There are rumors it was he who guided the assassin, and who helped you. That he kidnapped Koren. Gar'Tokk was missing for a long time."

Apollo shook his head, then he raised himself up with great effort. Apollo finally asked the question that he'd been wondering about all those centars in the cell.

If he had just had more insight, realized the danger, perhaps Jinkrat would still be alive. Koren would be fine—healthy.

"Athena—am I responsible?"

"Nobody knows," Athena said. "Apollo—I just don't know what to believe."

Apollo searched his sister's face, wondering what he would think or do if it had been Athena in the cell, and Athena he'd seen beating Jinkrat—a man

not nearly strong enough to defend himself against Apollo's wrath. With his son looking on, crying hysterically for Apollo to stop.

"Athena," he said, taking her hands. "Find Gar'Tokk. Find Baltar. He knows a lot more than he's telling. They'll be able to prove I didn't do it. Jinkrat was betrayed. That was his own man that shot him."

"All right," Athena said, embracing Apollo once again. They were cut short by the guard, who returned, announcing that her time was up.

"Goodbye," Apollo whispered in Athena's ear. As she left, he wondered if he would ever see her again.

"I guess second best is better than nothing," Athena said in a low voice as she escorted Baltar to the bridge. Baltar laughed.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked. "I would have thought I'd be much lower down on your list than that."

"I—" Athena stopped, holding herself back. Apollo was in trouble, and the fate of the *Galactica* rested on the information she could pull out of Baltar. "I didn't mean it, Baltar," she finally said in frustration. "I was just hoping to find Gar'Tokk first."

"Nomen don't much care for human women," Baltar said.

Athena noticed in horror that Baltar was leering at her. She'd wondered about his "interest" when he'd interrupted her and Starbuck in Apollo's quarters. It seemed like that had been centurons before, even though it was only a few sectares.

Baltar took Athena's lack of response for encouragement, and we went on. "Yes," he said, tracing a woman's figure in the air with his hands as he struggled to keep up with Athena's longer strides on the way to the bridge. "Human women are soft, shapely, lovely. Borellian Nomen prefer to mate with women who are—"

Baltar moved both his hands in parallel lines, straight up and down. "And they have sharp teeth."

"Baltar! Would you be serious?"

"I am serious," he said, looking at her with wide, innocent eyes—ridiculous on his world-weary features.

Athena couldn't help but laugh. "Baltar, Tigh is waiting," she said. "We can't waste time. Apollo needs us."

"Apollo, Apollo, Apollo," Baltar said. "I suppose he knows how it feels to be locked up now."

"He didn't—" Athena stopped herself. She didn't really know what Apollo had or hadn't done.

"I was there, Athena," Baltar said.

"That's why you're coming with me and not back down in the brig yourself, you criminal," she said.

Soon, they were at the bridge. Tigh turned, and his normally calm face was full of worry and exhaustion. "I don't know how much longer we can hold on," he told Athena. "Since the… incident… people are out of control. It's the strangest thing," he said. "I've heard a different story from everyone. Every single person who saw that thing on tape saw something different!"

"Have you never heard of the tradition of witnessing?" Baltar said, stepping forward. Athena had the strangest view of him then. For the first time, in his manner and face, he looked almost like what he had once been, a proud Lord of the Council, a leader—a man who held respect in his hand as her father had done.

"No," Tigh said sharply. Obviously, he hadn't glimpsed anything but the old, dangerous, wily enemy standing before him.

"It is a very old tradition, and a wise one," Baltar said. "Of those who witness any event, there will be a different story from each. He who sits in judgment must use the sight of his heart, not just of his eyes. And he must listen with his soul, not with his ears."

"Well, a pretty story," Tigh said, turning back to his console. "Too bad you don't have a heart or a soul, Baltar."

Athena thought that a trace of hurt flitted over Baltar's face, but it was soon replaced by his usual deep, disdainful scowl.

"Names," Baltar snarled. "You don't bother me, Tigh. You're just a stupid man with no imagination."

Tigh whirled, taking a step toward Baltar in anger before he regained his military composure and stopped. "If you can't make yourself useful, I'll escort you down to the brig myself," Tigh said stiffly.

Athena stepped between the two men. "Baltar," she said. "I brought you here to tell me what, exactly, you know about the assassination of Jinkrat."

"I saw Apollo attacking Jinkrat," Baltar said. "Not without provocation, I might add."

"We all saw that!" Athena cried.

Baltar waited, drawing the moment out as long as he could. Then he shook his head. "Look to Council Member Aron. Note how quickly he stepped away from Apollo and Jinkrat. The Council Members were terrified, but he seemed to—well, it's certainly what I would have done. If I were he."

"Aron," Tigh said in disgust. "Our new leader."

"Is he fully in power?" Baltar asked.

Tigh shook his head. "The Council has sent a new communication. He will be soon enough. He's preparing to take command at any moment."

"Great," Athena said, rubbing her head. "What are we supposed to do?"

"The wise man waits," Baltar said. "And watches."

"Enough of the philosophy," Tigh cried. "I should lock you in the library!"

"Now it's time to wait, and watch," Baltar said, turning before the other two realized what was happening. The bridge doors slid open and a phalanx of Council guards entered, followed by a Council Leader Aron in a brand-new, awful looking black and red uniform. Athena's eyes widened.

He stepped right up to her and Tigh, ignoring Baltar, and smiled.

"Good to see you!" Aron exclaimed. "And it's great to be on the bridge of my battlestar once again."

This was not the same Aron. He even seemed yahrens younger, and full of energy.

Tigh's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing. Athena noticed that he did not salute—and also that Aron didn't respond to this. He knew none of the command formalities, except, apparently, putting on a hastily made uniform.

"I'm in command now," Aron announced, surveying the bridge. He was no longer very kindly.

Then he turned to Athena. "The lovely Athena," he said. "I imagine you're quite worried about your brother."

"Apollo's fine," Athena said, nearly adding, "No thanks to you." But she held her tongue.

"Well," Baltar said, sidling close. "It's nice to be so… wanted."

They all turned to look at him, and he raised his chin stubbornly. "What?" Baltar said. "Why are you all staring at me?"

"Baltar," Aron said, finally acknowledging him. "Why were you there to escort Apollo to the Chambers and the brig? Have you finally found a… friend?"

"Perhaps," Baltar said. Athena watched Baltar's eyes narrow to suspicious slits as he scanned Aron's face. Aron didn't seem to notice the quick expression of disgust.

Aron seemed to lose interest in Baltar, and he turned back to the controls of the *Galactica*.

"Tigh," he said. "I am aware of your tricks and delays. You will at last ground all Vipers."

Tigh's eyes widened. "We're still—"

"You heard me," Aron snarled.

Athena recoiled. There was no longer even a shred of elderly kindness or concern.

Tigh made some movements at the console. Athena, accustomed to bridge procedures, realized that he'd done nothing but authorize a routine system check.

Amazingly—Aron didn't seem to realize that Tigh had disobeyed his order.

"Oh, uh—Aron," Baltar said, stepping closer. "Haven't you thought to give a speech to the people?"

Aron whirled around, his face a mask of rage. He raised his fist, and Baltar quailed.

"Don't tell me what to do, little man," he cried. Athena stepped back in shock. This was pure evil, irrational and wild.

Then she looked over at Tigh. His expression showed that he was thinking the same thing. Tigh appeared to think for a moment, then he spoke.

"Athena, would you come here and check to see all the patrols are grounded." Then he smiled a smarmy grin at Aron—Athena couldn't believe that honest, hard-charging Tigh was capable of that type of expression—but then again, who knew what people were capable of under pressure?

Athena approached, knowing the request was ridiculous, and Tigh said softly, "Boomer and Bojay are coming in from patrol. I signaled them to come to the bridge as soon as they land. Code Red-One, Green-Three."

"Ugh," Athena said, squeezing the Colonel's shoulder. Red-One-highest alert. Green-Three-watch your back-covert operation. Right then, she could have kissed him, but she knew that would arouse Aron's suspicions, even if nothing else had so far. A brief glance at Baltar showed that look on his face again. Now that things had quieted down a little, he was loitering behind Aron… and leering.

In sickbay, Sheba woke, calling out warnings. In her unconscious mind, the bomb was still exploding. But the only response that she heard was a cruel, cold voice saying, "Take her to the brig!"

She thought that she saw the boy, Koren, being carried in, but she could hardly be certain of anything.

And everything went black.

Chapter Nine

APOLLO COULDN'T believe it when they threw a bleeding, unconscious Sheba into his cell.

He went to her side, carefully examining her. "Oh, Sheba," he said. His heart filled with cold rage and his body suddenly ached with worry. He'd seen a lot of wounds, and this one was in a very bad place, deep in the left side of her body. She was breathing slowly and steadily, but Apollo could see that Doctor Salik hadn't gotten very far with her treatment.

"Why did they do this?" he asked in a whisper. Gently, he carried Sheba to his cot and laid her on it, smoothing the hair gently away from the wound. After a moment, he went to the cell door and started banging on it.

"Hey! We need a doctor! Get a doctor in here!" he cried. But no one answered. No one came.

Out at the edge of the *Ur* cloud, Dalton, Troy and Trays were sailing, coasting free on their own inertia.

"We're almost out of fuel," Troy told Dalton. He tried to sound professional, but they all knew what would happen when the last of the fuel was gone. The batteries wouldn't last more than a few centars. Then the air would go, but before that, the heat would go, and they'd be at the exact temperature of space.

Troy remembered Starbuck's joke about what happened to Cylons stranded out in space. "Only one good thing about those tin cans," Starbuck said, chewing his fumarello. "They're metal, so they'll never turn into corpsicles."

It had seemed really funny at the time.

The comm crackled. "Troy," came Dalton's voice. She sounded so little and small, just like a little girl.

All at once, Troy wanted to hold her close. He wanted to kiss her and just hold her, form his body around hers and hug her tight.

It was so fracking unfair!

Dalton, so pretty, so young and full of life and hope.

And so infuriatingly stubborn, pig-headed and strong willed. He remembered what she'd said: they were *Galactica's* last hope. They had to find the way out of this cloud. Only Troy and Dalton, two together against the universe. Well, Troy thought, except for Trays. A sudden burst of anger went through him that they were out there, and Trays was there, too.

But he couldn't be mad at Trays. It was the universe he was mad at. If there was just something he could do—anything. He wracked his brains, tried to think. If only they could—

"Troy," she said again.

"Yeah, Dalton," he said.

"Troy, I was thinking."

"Dalton, stick to what you're good at," Trays shot back.

Fury raged through Troy.

"Shut up for once, will you?" Troy yelled.

"Hey—I can tease her if I want. Dalton understands." There was silence over the comm for a micron.

"No, I don't understand, Trays. Are you trying to tell me you think I'm dumb?"

"No," Trays said. "Dalton, I was just teasing."

Troy couldn't believe how immature Trays sounded. How could Dalton have ever even been vaguely interested in the guy? She couldn't have been

thinking. He bit his lip. Now he was in danger of starting in on her, and that was the last thing he wanted.

The situation couldn't be worse. Here they were, lost in the middle of some crazy place beyond time and space where there weren't even any stars or planets, and *Galactica* was probably a million parsecs away—or maybe ten thousand metrons. Lords of Kobol only knew. They were lost, running out of fuel, their instruments crazy and wild. That would be funny, Troy thought. Lost within a few metrons of home.

But he just said, "Let's think about other stuff. What else can we talk about?"

"Remember that time we played triad and I won?" she said.

"Yeah," Troy said.

"You don't remember any of the times I beat your ass," Trays growled.

Dalton didn't respond. "You looked so funny!" she said to Troy. Then, she laughed.

She was so incredibly infuriating. So beautiful. So young…

"Dalton, you're a poor sport," he said.

"What do you mean?" she asked in an innocent voice.

"I mean, when you win, you're not supposed to gloat. You're not supposed to keep… reminding the other person."

"Gloating is good," Trays offered.

"Trays!" she said, frustrated. "I didn't mean it like that. I just meant that I really liked playing with you, Troy."

Troy remembered running after her, the way she tossed her long, silky hair. Sometimes she was so playful, like a little kid. She reminded him… suddenly he laughed out loud… sometimes she reminded him of his daggit,

Muffit. Muffit had been stubborn, too, and a real pain in the butt. Poor daggit. Did daggits go to… Troy laughed.

"What's so funny, Troy?" she asked, her voice suddenly angry.

"Nothing," he said.

"Yeah!" Trays asked. He was determined to get into this conversation. "What's so funny, Troy?"

"Tell me!" she demanded.

"Oh, Dalton," Troy said, sighing. "I was just thinking of old times. Muffit."

"Your daggit," Dalton said. "Starbuck told me about him."

"Daggit! You baby, Troy! Your daggit—some good he'll do us out here. Troy's got a daggit…" Trays mocked.

"Trays, cut it out," Dalton said. But she was giggling.

Troy fought back the sudden flash of anger. He wouldn't have expected much more from Trays, but sometimes Dalton was so self-centered. But she was young, he told himself. A lot of young people were like that. She'd grow out of it. She had time… he corrected himself. Before, she'd had time. He checked the air gauges; and watched the fuel gauge quit flashing red before his eyes, going all the way to red.

He'd never seen that! He really didn't know how much longer they had. Maybe only microns more of fuel.

"Dalton," Troy said, intending to warn her about the fuel.

"I love you, Troy!" she said. Then he heard small sobs coming over the comm.

"Dalton!" Trays cried. Troy heard muffled cursing over the comm then Trays' signal went blank. On purpose.

"Trays!" Troy cried. But it was too late—Dalton had done it.

"Trays, don't!" Dalton said. "Come back!" But Trays had cut both of them off.

Troy had no idea what to say, wishing he could somehow do something about his rapidly dwindling vocabulary. The air couldn't be running out that fast, but Troy was having a really hard time breathing.

"I said I love you, Troy," she repeated. "Don't you have anything to say to me? Are you going deaf?"

"No," he said, suddenly frightened by the way his eyes felt, and the way he could hardly breathe at all.

He checked the air—it was fine. He realized that his heart was pounding so fast that he was starting to hyperventilate.

"Troy, are you okay?" Dalton asked. "You sound funny. Is your air getting —"

"No, I'm fine, Dalton." You big idiot, Troy! You're dumber than a Cylon! Tell her you—

"Well, I understand if you don't feel the same way," Dalton went on. "I mean, everybody likes you, Troy. You're really handsome… and brave… and your father's Commander Apollo and maybe somesectare you'll be in command of the *Galactica* ... that's when we, uh… I mean I understand if you don't—"

"Dalton, shut up!" Troy cried. "I love you too!"

"I mean, all the girls really like you, Troy. It's like—"

"Dalton!" Troy said again in a firm voice. "Did you hear me? I… love… you."

There came a long silence. The comm crackled again. "Oh," Dalton said at last.

They coasted for a while longer and Troy stared out at the blank *Ur* cloud.

Then, after a moment, he laughed. "This is pretty funny," he told Dalton. "We're out here, our fuel's almost gone, the air's going to run out soon, there's no way back, we're totally lost—"

"And we finally found each other," Dalton said, for once, finishing his sentence for him with exactly the words that he meant.

"I can't believe this," Troy said.

"I can't believe I said that with Trays right here," Dalton said.

Troy shook his head. "Poor Trays. He'd walk on Borellian glass for you, Dalton. I think he—"

"Let's try to get Trays back," Dalton said. "We can't let him just drift off like this."

"Trays!" Troy called over the comm. There was no reply.

Dalton banked her Viper so that she was in direct sight of Trays' wing. Looking over, Troy could see her gesturing wildly. She was crazy—completely nuts. Here they had about a micron of fuel left, and she was wasting it trying to get Trays' attention when he obviously had nothing left to say to either of them.

Then, to Troy's astonishment, he saw Trays' comm light blink back on. Still, Trays didn't say anything.

"I just have one thing to say," Trays said at last.

Dalton's joyous whoop came over the comm. "Trays! You're back!" she cried.

"I just have one thing to add to this little love fest," Trays continued in a deadpan voice. Troy, though his relationship with Trays had always been rocky, was certain of the hurt that he heard in Trays' voice right then. The hotshot pilot was giving it everything he had not to let Dalton know how much her impulsive declaration hurt.

"What's that, buddy?" Troy asked, feeling magnanimous.

He couldn't believe it. His heart felt like it was about to come out of his chest. He'd won! He'd won! Dalton loved him! Troy!

"You two are sure going to have some ugly kids. I just hope I won't have to be around to see the end result of this pairing."

"Trays!" Dalton cried. "We weren't talking about—"

"Trays," Troy said, suddenly losing all the generosity he had before. "That's not—"

"They'll get your looks, Troy," Trays continued in a drawl. "And Dalton—they'll be just as sharp as you are. I think they'll have to start a special school for them. Why—"

"Trays!" Dalton shouted. "I can't believe that I came around and used all my fuel for you! You're incorrigible!"

The comm went silent again for more long microns.

"Just teasing," Trays said.

"Trays!" Dalton and Troy cried in unison.

Trays cleared his throat. "I just really wanted to say. Well—"

Troy and Dalton both waited.

"I wanted to say you're a lucky guy, Troy."

Suddenly, Troy's throat felt like it was swelling up. "Trays—thanks," he said.

Then he checked the air display. His stomach sank—it was beginning to flutter. He'd never seen that before, either.

"Dalton, Trays," he said, meaning to warn them, but he cut himself short. He peered out of his cockpit. He thought he'd seen a flash, far in the distance, but he couldn't be certain. Troy held his breath and waited for a moment, scanning the quadrant where he'd seen the flash. His eyes were

exhausted from all that whiteness—the stuff they'd been flying through for sectons—he could be having some type of effect from the air running low. Hypoxia— oxygen deprivation—people saw all kinds of stuff under those circumstances.

He saw another flash.

"Guys!" he said in excitement. "Look! Starboard—two o'clock sharp."

"I see it!" Dalton said. "There's something there."

"Me, too," came Trays' voice. "It's silver—like a crescent."

"Well, we can't move toward it—the fuel's too low. But it looks like it's coming toward us," Troy said.

At first, Troy was hoping it was a Viper team, but in moments— the thing was headed in fast—he realized that it was far too large.

A few moments later, all three of them could see it clearly. Something was coming at them—something huge and gleaming silver. It was the strangest thing!

"Dalton, doesn't that look like—" Trays said.

"Yeah," Dalton said. "I see. That looks like Valor!" Valor of the Sky, the great sentient ship who had fought to save the *Galactica* during the battle with the Cylons and the Chitain. But how could Valor be there, coming toward them?

Troy decided that it didn't matter how it happened. All that mattered was that their savior was fast approaching.

It was Valor! It could be no other ship. Troy recognized those markings, that unique shape. The great ship hovered silently over the three Vipers, dwarfing them. Each of their ships shuddered as the huge ship locked on them with a tow beam, and began to carry them back in the direction it had come.

"Where's he taking us?" Dalton asked.

"I don't know," Trays said. "But it's under his power, so I'm willing to wait."

They traveled swiftly through the *Ur* cloud until things began to change. Troy spotted more flashes, and huge, twisted pieces of metal floating silently in the cloud.

"This place gives me the chills," Dalton said.

"Yeah," Troy said as they silently traveled through the scraps that floated like some kind of man-made asteroid field. Troy had seen things like that before, but never so many, all in one place. This was the remains of a great space battle—a graveyard in the midst of the *Ur* cloud.

"How did all this get here?" Dalton asked.

"I guess it's from the battle. That looks like part of a Cylon battlestar over there," Troy said. "Mark that, Trays. It could have something in it we could use."

"Marked," Trays responded.

"I don't get it," Dalton said. "I mean, whatever happened, we got pulled through, but how could these ships still be here?"

"Something that happened as we made the transition must have pulled these ships with us," Troy said.

"There's a Viper over there," Trays said. His voice was low and respectful—a tone that Troy had seldom heard from him. It was not a whole Viper; it was a shell, its pilot long gone.

"Yeah," Troy said. "I see it."

"Look!" Dalton cried. "Beyond Valor," she said.

Troy peered through the cockpit. He spotted a familiar shape, and white, shining metal, marred here and there, and twisted and torn. It was large—a huge piece—then he spotted the telltale markings of a Colonial battlestar.

"It's the engine section and part of one of the bays," Troy said.

"*Pegasus*," Dalton said in an awed whisper. "That's what's left."

"Valor wanted us to see this," Troy said. "He didn't bring us here for nothing."

"Oh, right, buddy. Whoo-whoo!" Trays said.

"No," Dalton said, snapping at Trays. "Troy's right. Valor brought us here on purpose."

Above them, Valor's lights shone, flashing in the direction of the hulk of the *Pegasus*.

"Well, whatever's going on, we can take our Vipers down there. There's enough left of that bay that I know we can get in there," Trays said.

"You sure?" Troy asked.

"Sure as I am of my own name," Trays countered.

Troy thought a moment. "Okay," he said. "Trays, you and Dalton take your Vipers down to the *Pegasus*. Check it out, do some recon, and get whatever you can find that's useful onto your Vipers. Fuel, food—anything the *Galactica* can use."

"Where are you going?" Dalton asked. "You mean you—"

"You and Trays will be fine," he said.

"She's in good hands," Trays called.

"I'm sure," Troy said. "Don't forget that she's mine now, Trays."

Trays coughed into the comm sarcastically.

"I'm going to head back to that Cylon battlestar. I can't help but think that Valor wanted us to know about that, too."

"What's worth anything on a Cylon piece of felgercarb?" Trays demanded.

"Don't know, Trays," Troy said. "But out here, nothing's normal. We can't afford to miss any chance. Not with the fleet in the shape it's in."

"Troy's right," Dalton told Trays. "We'll check out the *Pegasus*."

Dalton's and Trays' Vipers trembled again as Valor released them from his tow beam. He hovered overhead as if he was waiting for them to do something. Dalton whispered a prayer to the Lords of Kobol that they had enough fuel to reach the remains of *Pegasus's* landing bay. She was glad she'd prayed, too, because her engine began to cut out just as she and Trays carefully slid their Vipers through the torn wreckage into the bay.

There was the inner door, open, as it should have been during battle, and they landed their Vipers just as it started to slide down.

"Could there be somebody here?" Dalton asked in alarm.

Looking back over her shoulder, she watched Valor's form receding—the ship was towing Troy back toward the Cylon ship!

"No," Trays said. "That's not it. It's automatic. It sensed us coming in; that's what it's supposed to do. Haven't you heard how ship controls keep going long after the crew is gone when the ship's torn apart? That means there's still some power, Dalton. Cylons blasted the power core off; all the crew areas gone, and the bridge—everything else is what's left."

"Thank the Lords of Kobol," she whispered.

"So we'll find fuel," Trays said. "Don't know about the food, but at least we know we've got a chance to get back home."

"I can't believe it," Dalton said as they waited for the bay to pressurize. "It's like a miracle."

Soon, Dalton and Trays found the fuel cells. A lot were damaged and destroyed, but enough remained to carry them back to the *Galactica,* and there were even extra to restore the fleet's badly-depleted stores, even though neither Dalton nor Trays had any idea just how badly those stores had become depleted. And, even better, they found crates and crates of food

pills. The gravity was completely gone, so getting around on the inside of the destroyed ship was a real adventure.

But it was an adventure that soon turned to grief and deep sadness. Even Trays' cocky attitude became subdued as they saw the real face of war.

Dalton's face closed up like a box. Her eyes were downcast. Trays tried talking to her, but it seemed like nothing could break her out of the black mood that had come over her.

"They're just dead guys," Trays said, and even he realized how shallow he sounded.

"These were our friends," Dalton said. "Look! Don't you have eyes?"

Bodies, blasted beyond all recognition, floated in the null gravity. The eyes of some were closed. If Dalton tried to pretend, she could imagine that they were swimming, floating in some kind of giant pool. But not the ones with eyes open, frozen, with their mouths wide in their final screams. And then there were the ones who… didn't have eyes at all.

Pegasus, the proud battlestar that had escaped the battle of Caprica, that had fought so long and so hard against the Cylons. Cain's ship! Sheba's father—the great Commander Cain.

They had all lost so much. So very much. Dalton had never really thought about it before. How lucky she was—to even be alive. That could have been her there. She spotted a woman in a medtech's uniform, floating away from *Pegasus* former sickbay. That could have been Dalton's own mother! The Cylons didn't care. They just destroyed, over and over again.

She was moving away from Trays now, lost in her own painful memories.

"Trays," she called. "Look—it's their—" It was the *Pegasus* pilot's lounge. The scene in there was beyond words that Dalton knew to describe it. It was like Hades, she thought. Only a Hades worse than she'd ever imagined.

"I don't think they had a chance," she whispered.

"Dalton!" came Trays' voice.

She turned, feeling like she was swimming in the waters of grief herself.

"Dalton, I think this could be something important."

Turning away from the horror of all those brave, dead warriors—trying not to remember the names of the ones who had been her friends—Dalton forced herself to move back toward Trays' voice.

Trays was standing by yet another body, but it was anchored to the torn and twisted bulkhead somehow.

As Dalton got closer, she saw why the body was held in place. Its cloak had caught against a jagged shard of metal and it was held fast. It had probably been there ever since the ship had been pulled through into the *Ur* cloud after the battle.

The cloak was blue, of rich, deep fabric. A gold medallion floated above the man's neck, fluttering slowly in the gravity-free air.

Dalton recognized the form immediately. The sharp features, and thick white brows. The hair, usually so neat, waved about his face. It was Sheba's father, Commander Cain.

"Cain!" she cried, running to Trays' side.

"I guess it really is him," Trays said, not a trace of mockery in his voice, only respect.

"Oh, Commander Cain," Sheba said, touching the still face of the former great commander of the *Pegasus*.

"It looks like he was trying to do something here," Trays said.

Dalton nodded.

"This looks like it probably led to the Viper bays before the attack," Trays said. The metal was twisted and wracked beyond all recognition, but Dalton

thought that Trays had guess right. Cain had probably been about to get into a Viper himself when the final blow had come. But he'd never made it.

Silently, she touched Cain's cheek where it was stained and mottled with blood, and thought a prayer to herself. For the great Commander, and for all the many others on the *Pegasus*.

"We'd better go," Trays said. He started away.

Dalton lingered, unwilling to leave Cain's side. It seemed… disrespectful to just leave him there like that. Again, she lowered her head to pray. And as she did, she thought that she saw Cain move.

Not the weird floating of all the dead bodies, but a quick movement, of his eyebrows.

She leaned closer. His eyelids were trembling! Then, all at once, the body shuddered, and Cain took a long, deep breath, rasping into his chest.

"Trays!" Dalton cried. "He's not dead—Commander Cain is alive!"

"Fracking holy felgercarb!" Trays yelled, running toward her. "It can't—"

"It can be, Trays," Dalton said. "He's breathing!"

And though Commander Cain's eyes were still shut tight, and with the huge wounds all along his body, and it seemed absolutely impossible, Trays and Dalton both saw his chest rising and falling, and heard his breath rasping. Together, they freed his cloak from the twisted metal and carried him back to their Vipers, hearts pounding. As soon as Trays and Dalton got Cain's body back to their Vipers, they saw the shimmering flash of a Viper.

Troy was back, and he slipped into the bay, leaping out and running toward them.

"I've got fuel cells!" he cried. "It was on the Cylon ship. There was tons of it left. I'm not sure how much it's good for, but maybe there's some use to it. It was all still active—not like our Tylium reactors. Maybe that's the ticket

out of here, although it wasn't any use to them any more. Man, I never saw so many dead Cylons!"

"Troy," Dalton said quietly. But Troy had already fallen silent, his expression completely changed.

"Cain," he said. "You want to bring his body back."

Dalton shook her head. "Troy—" she started to say.

"The old man's still alive," Trays said, his voice full of excitement.

"Lords of Kobol," Troy said in a stunned whisper. "That's impossible. No one could have survived for that long. And look at him—he's torn to pieces."

"I know, Troy," Dalton said, "But it's true all the same."

Troy looked around the half-ruined bay of the *Pegasus*, his eyes wide. "I don't know," he said. "You two, you've got your Vipers full. I'll—I'll take him."

Dalton nodded.

"Well, of course, you do the honors," Trays said sarcastically.

"Stop it, Trays," Dalton warned. Troy watched the other young pilot's face flush. But Trays didn't say anything more.

Soon, the barely living body of Commander Cain was put on Troy's Viper and the three pilots, refueled and laden, left the sad wreckage of the *Pegasus*. As the three pilots left, they didn't look back, but instead looked forward, searching the graveyard of torn hulks for Valor of the Sky. But neither of them saw anything.

He was gone, as quickly and mysteriously as he'd come.

"Troy, it's almost like we imagined him," Dalton said.

"We didn't," Troy said. "He was real. That tow beam was real."

"But he's just gone—just like that," Dalton mused.

"I know, Dalton—maybe we'll see him again."

"I don't know," she said thoughtfully. "He was like a ghost."

"There's no such thing as ghosts!" Trays cried. Even so, he was glad he was in his own cockpit, so the other two couldn't see him shiver.

Centars had passed while Apollo sat watching Sheba, waiting to see if she would show signs of recovering.

She had grown no worse, but Apollo, completely exhausted, had fallen asleep beside the cot, his body curled on the cold deck of the brig.

He woke, startled, and heard something at the cell door. Leaping to his feet, he prepared himself to fight. Maybe they were coming to take him away—then, he thought—maybe they'd relented and were sending some help for Sheba. Curse Aron for throwing her in sickbay! He wondered why—why would Aron be so needlessly cruel? All he could think of was that Sheba was the one who'd physically carried the bomb out of sickbay. Maybe Aron thought she had seen something—noticed something—and if she recovered, could speak against him. As daughter of Cain, and heretofore blameless, people would listen to her. Maybe Aron just couldn't afford to have her around after he got rid of Apollo.

After all, Sheba would never bow to Aron if she survived. Not for a second. He waited in a crouch, and the door opened with a creak.

A cloaked figure entered, followed by three others. There was hardly room to move in the tiny cell. Not with Apollo, Sheba unconscious on the bed, and Gar'Tokk and three other equally imposing battle-ready Nomen.

"Gar'Tokk!" Apollo cried, grabbing the Noman's arms.

Apollo was the only Galactican who could have done that; no other human had free permission to touch a Noman. The other three didn't seem to like it much, growling in their way, but they made no other complaints.

"Be silent, Apollo," GarTokk said. Apollo hadn't realized before how stealthy and silent the huge Noman could be, or how soft and quiet he could make his voice when he desired it.

GarTokk leaned down. "We have very little time," he said. Then he looked over to see Sheba on the cot.

"Your friend, the fighting woman," GarTokk said softly. "Naga can carry her." He turned to one of his three companions, who nodded and went to the cot, lifting Sheba like she weighed as much as an infant.

Then GarTokk, looking cautiously for trouble, led them out of the cell and into the brig corridor.

As they moved through the brig, Apollo noticed one of the guards at a table with a glass of ale and some pyramid cards. He still had a card in his hand. It looked like he was asleep, but Apollo took a second look.

Nobody slept with his head at that type of angle. He wondered if it had been GarTokk or one of the other Nomen—this one had joined the Security Council guard in testing a Noman's strength.

Suddenly, three guards appeared in front of them.

"Sound the alarm!" one of them cried.

GarTokk and the two Nomen pushed forward, grappling with the guards. The struggle was brief, but fierce. Apollo cried out to warn GarTokk, but the last of the guards escaped, scrambling away to sound the alarm. GarTokk paused to reflect on their work, lying crumpled on the floor.

"That one should not have escaped," he told his mates.

"We are not familiar with this place," one of the other Nomen said.

"Nomen do not make excuses," GarTokk said ominously. Then, turning to Apollo, he nodded.

No more words were needed. Soon there'd be more guards than even the Nomen could handle. They began to run.

Apollo could barely breathe as he ran beside Gar'Tokk. "Wait," he said, resting and putting his hands on his knees. All that time rotting in the cell, and the exhaustion was catching up with him.

Gar'Tokk halted. The other three stopped as well, and Naga, holding Sheba in his arms, was almost comical as he tried to balance the extra weight.

"Can he take her to sickbay?" Apollo asked Gar'Tokk. "She's got to get help —right away. She's bleeding inside."

Gar'Tokk's brows lowered. "Yes," he said. "I understand, Apollo. Naga does not speak your language. I will explain to him."

He turned to Naga and spoke a few words in the guttural Borellian tongue. The Noman carrying Sheba turned and headed in the opposite direction.

"We go to find friends," Gar'Tokk told Apollo. "Have you rested sufficiently?"

Apollo hadn't, but he nodded to the Noman, gritted his teeth, and followed the trio down the corridor. Soon he realized they were heading for one of the launch pods.

When they reached the pod, there was a lot of activity, although it looked like every Viper was grounded.

Apollo searched for signs of Boomer, Bojay, or even Starbuck —hoping that Starbuck had changed his mind, not flying out after Dalton after all. Or maybe Starbuck found her! Mechanics and pilots stared to see the three strange Nomen in their territory, and they also stared at Apollo. But these were Colonial Warriors and loyal men and women. For the moment, Apollo was safe from the Council Security guards, and from dealing with Aron— the murderous traitor.

Finally, Apollo spotted Boomer, and called out his name.

"Apollo!" Boomer cried upon seeing him. "How did you—" Boomer cut himself short seeing the Nomen.

"Hey," he said, smiling. "It's nice to have friends."

"Yeah," Apollo said, as they embraced.

Now, there were at least a few moments to talk. Cautiously, Apollo looked around and led the small group to a corner covered from view by a grounded Viper that was being fueled.

"Gar'Tokk," Apollo said as soon as they were out of plain sight. "How did you get these men? How did you manage to—"

"Nomen have their ways," Gar'Tokk said inscrutably.

"Just the facts, Gar'Tokk," Apollo said. "There were no Nomen on *Galactica*. They were all on the transport ships."

"I do not like these tiny Vipers," Gar'Tokk said. "They do not accommodate my legs."

"You were in a Viper?" Boomer broke in, astonished.

"Yes, small man," Gar'Tokk said. Apollo almost burst out laughing—he was pretty sure this was the one and only time anyone had ever called Boomer a "small man."

"Gar'Tokk, how did you manage to get hold of a Viper?" Apollo asked, although he already had a pretty good idea.

"Humans are not attentive to details," Gar'Tokk said. "They did not notice how short the trousers were, and how I could not buckle the boots. Nor did they notice how badly the helmet fit."

Boomer and Apollo burst out laughing.

"I see no humor," Gar'Tokk said.

Apollo slapped his leg, he was laughing so hard. "It's all right, Gar'Tokk," he said between chuckles. "I'm really grateful."

Looking up at the other two Nomen, he saw them with completely puzzled expressions on their rough, bearded faces.

"No more laughter," Gar'Tokk said. Boomer and Apollo struggled to compose themselves. "I must tell you what has happened. Athena sent me a message. That is why I undertook the mission in your… inadequate… ship to retrieve these men. They are among our most valiant fighters." Gar'Tokk turned to the other two Nomen and said more words in the Borellian language. They nodded, the confused expressions suddenly changing to pride and confidence.

"What message from Athena?" Apollo asked.

"This… Aron," Gar'Tokk said, making a disgusted expression. "He has taken control not only of the Council, but he believes he has control of the *Galactica* itself."

"No!" Apollo cried. He had prepared himself for some kind of show trial, but he knew in his heart that the truth would come out. It just wasn't possible that the bumbling, council fools and Aron were in charge of their fates. Of their lives!

"Athena and Tigh are on the bridge with him at all times," GarTokk said. "That is how they got the message through."

GarTokk leaned close to Apollo and put his enormous hand on Apollo's shoulder, looking into Apollo's eyes for a long moment. "They have managed to deceive this man for the time being. But he has given an order that fuel reserves be gathered, and this will cut off all air to the crew and civilian areas of the *Galactica*."

"But—that's insane!" Apollo cried. "How can anyone—"

"Everyone will die," GarTokk intoned.

"We've got to stop him," Apollo said. He started to move, but GarTokk pulled him back.

"Listen, Apollo," GarTokk said. "The warriors are in disarray. Many are being held under guard. Athena and Tigh are pretending to obey Aron's orders, but Tigh has told me that it's only a matter of time before the murderer understands what is happening and destroys them—as he tried to do to your female friend."

"Sheba!" Apollo said.

"Yes," GarTokk said. "He wished her to die in that cell with you."

"Lords of Kobol," Apollo whispered. "And what about the boy, Koren?"

"I am told that he is still unconscious. The healer does not know if he will recover."

"Like Sheba," Apollo said. "We've got to get Aron, GarTokk."

"Yes," GarTokk said. "But we must have a plan."

Apollo started to say something else, but an alarm sounded throughout the pod.

"Incoming!" someone cried.

More Vipers were on the way.

"It's the other patrol," they heard a voice crying.

"They're back!"

"Troy!" Boomer cried. "And Dalton and Trays!" The Nomen stayed in the shadows as Boomer and Apollo rushed out to greet their long-lost pilots—Apollo his very own son, Dalton, Starbuck's daughter, and hotheaded Trays, all three returning to a very changed *Galactica* and a fleet in full rebellion.

Apollo pushed his way through the clamoring warriors and mechanics to see Troy—a really exhausted, pale and disheveled Troy—climbing out of his Viper.

"Apollo!" Troy yelled. He was leaping down from the cockpit despite his exhaustion. They embraced, and Apollo held Troy close, whispering a silent prayer that the Lords had brought Troy home safe. Everything could change, Apollo thought—in the beat of a heart, in a single breath, in a single eyeblink.

"We've got fuel," Troy said breathlessly. Apollo looked over to see Dalton greeted like a heroine by Boomer and another group of pilots. "We've got more food."

"Troy," Apollo said—he didn't know what else to say. This had been the worst sectare of his life, but now Troy, his boy, was back, and it was like some kind of miracle that Apollo didn't understand, but that he wasn't about to question.

"And something else, Apollo—it's a miracle," Troy said.

Bojay came running up, and he and Boomer climbed up to Troy's Viper. Bojay let out a great whoop. Apollo looked at Troy, unable to understand why Bojay was so excited.

"Apollo, get up here!" Bojay yelled.

Apollo climbed up to stand beside Bojay on the wing of the Viper. Looking down into the cockpit, Apollo could hardly believe what he saw. He blinked—his eyes weren't focusing properly.

Then Bojay turned and yelled out into the crowd, "It's Cain! Troy Boy found Cain! Out there in the middle of nowhere!"

Bojay was right. A huge cheer went up.

"Cain! Cain!"

Troy had climbed up beside Apollo. Together, Apollo, Bojay, Boomer and Troy lifted Cain from the Viper—he wasn't moving at all—but Apollo heard him breathing. He'd never seen such wounds. How could Cain be alive? After so long?

"He's alive!" Bojay cried.

"Step aside," Boomer said in his calm voice. "Let us through."

The pilots had crowded close, but now when they saw Cain, torn and battered, they moved back with respectful nods and prayers.

"He's alive!" people cried. "Cain is alive! It's a miracle!"

It was a miracle, Apollo thought. Beyond his hope, or understanding. A gift from the Lords of Kobol, from the deities themselves. Now, he remembered what Baltar had said. About people believing in miracles. The three young pilots were back, bringing treasure—Dalton and Trays' Vipers were loaded with food and fuel from the *Pegasus* ... and the greatest miracle of all… Cain!

Dalton and Trays joined the group, and began to talk excitedly of what had happened. Apollo understood within a few words that the three young pilots had been within moments of death—they'd gone out to the edge and beyond. Out of fuel, out of air, they'd been floating toward oblivion when a miraculous ship appeared out of nowhere.

"It was incredible," Dalton said. "We thought we were gone for sure, and then here it came, right overhead. It towed us into this weird place—there were parts and pieces of ships everywhere."

Troy found a moment to squeeze in some words of his own. "We found Cain on the *Pegasus*," he said. "What was left of her."

"How could he have survived?" Apollo asked, although his eyes told him that it didn't really matter how—all that it mattered was that he was alive.

"The wreck must have been pulled into this cloud along with us somehow. I don't know. But there was enough of the engineering section left, and a landing bay that was still running down on the batteries, that Dalton and Trays pulled their Vipers in. They loaded up with all the fuel and food they could find. Then—"

"We found Commander Cain," Dalton said, her face flushed with excitement.

"Troy here found a Cylon hulk," Trays drawled.

"Half of one of their basestars," Troy said firmly.

"He brought back some of their fuel cells. There wasn't much left on *Pegasus* after Dalton and I finished, so—"

"I thought they could be of some use," Troy said. "They were working. Their drive was half-ruined, but still active."

"Troy, good work," Apollo said, embracing his son once more, feeling pride surge through his heart.

"What are you talking about—a ship that led you," Boomer said. "What other kind of ship is out there?"

"We saw something on the way back too," Bojay said.

"It was Valor," Dalton said. "The sentient ship of the Sky that fought alongside of us."

Boomer looked confused. "Valor?" he asked.

"Yeah," Dalton said. "He came right up to us, flashed his lights, and towed us straight to the *Pegasus*. He knew exactly where he was going. He saved our lives!"

"That can't be," Boomer said. "Valor died in the battle. I saw it with my own eyes. Bojay and I thought we saw something, but—"

"But he was—" Dalton paused, looking over at Troy, her eyes suddenly very wide.

"I can't explain it," Troy said. "He was just there."

"That's impossible," Boomer said. "Valor is really, truly gone."

"Boomer," Apollo said gently. "Maybe it's about time for all of us to start believing in miracles. Anything is possible." He squeezed Troy's shoulders, and Boomer slowly started to smile, trying to understand.

"For right now, we've got to get Cain to sickbay and then go deal with Aron. Tigh and Athena need our help!"

Troy, Dalton and Trays looked at each other, completely baffled.

"I'll explain later," Apollo said. "Right now, we've got to get some more of our friends. We've got an important date—with the biggest liar I ever saw in my life."

"Baltar?" Boomer asked.

"No, man," Apollo said. "I'd take Baltar over Aron any sectare. Baltar's been a pretty good man of late."

"Now that's a miracle," Bojay said.

"Bojay," Boomer said, shaking his head, as they carried Cain's body together, but everyone still laughed.

"I guess you did all right, hotshot," Bojay said to Trays as they left the bay together.

Trays glared over at Bojay, who suddenly grinned.

"I guess I won't be needing that cane after all," he said.

Boomer, despite himself, almost let go of Cain's shoulder, he started to laugh so hard.

"Some things never change," Apollo said. And he was right.

Chapter Ten

TIGH LOOKED over at Athena, silently questioning with his wide, dark eyes. "What should we do?" he mouthed. Aron was turned away, studying one of the command consoles.

Athena shook her head. Gar'Tokk had done it—he'd freed Apollo and they were on the way to the bridge. And it was like some kind of incredible miracle—praise the Lords of Kobol!—Dalton, Troy and Trays were back! And, beyond miracles—they had a cargo more precious than the fuel and food they'd found on the destroyed hulk of the *Pegasus*: Cain, alive, being carried in their arms to sickbay. The food and fuel would buy them precious time.

If Aron didn't get his way.

By some miracle, the *Pegasus* had been found. No one could have survived that disaster—it was a mausoleum, not a battlestar any longer. The remains of the ship had somehow been pulled into this *Ur* cloud, along with the wrecks of many other vessels destroyed in the last great battle. How could Cain have survived?

Not after all that destruction. Athena thought for the thousandth time, how could this be?

She looked over at Aron in silent fury. The destruction he'd caused—it was beyond all imagining. He was no battlestar commander, that was certain. He wasn't right in the head, either. He didn't act like anyone she'd ever known—not even crazy, vicious, Janus-headed Baltar. Why was he such a clever plotter and manipulator, and so stupid about many other things?

For example, he was just letting Baltar wander around unwatched, poking and prodding everything on the bridge. Anybody who'd turn his back on Baltar couldn't have an operating brain cell.

Athena groaned in disgust when Baltar caught her eye—and winked!

The thing was, Aron had something he called his "security policy." A little communicator with a big red button. He wouldn't say any more about it, even though Athena had tried batting her eyes at him to get more information.

And even though Gar'Tokk had two more Nomen with him, and Apollo was free, it was just the four of them. Apollo had insisted on leaving the others behind—Boomer, Bojay, Trays and the rest, responsible to see Cain safely to sickbay. He said they were his rear guard.

She held her breath and waited.

"They're almost here," Tigh whispered.

In a moment, Apollo burst onto the bridge, aiming a laser pistol straight at Aron's face. Gar'Tokk and the other two Nomen stood behind him, towering over him and glowering at the interloper.

"Aron!" Apollo cried. "It's over."

Slowly, Aron turned. Athena and Tigh went to Apollo's side. Jinkrat had taken their side arms, so they couldn't do much other than lend moral support.

"Oh, Apollo," Aron said calmly. "I've been expecting you. Glad to see you brought your friend." He looked over at Gar'Tokk and grinned.

"Your time is at an end," Apollo said, cautiously approaching the two-faced Council member.

"I doubt that," Aron said. "But I should thank you for bringing this Noman. He evaded our capture—not very nice of him."

"Aron," Apollo said. "Give it up. Everything's changed. The pilots are back, and your time is over. Come with us."

Aron shrugged. "Where?" he asked.

"Back to the brig—you'll get the cell this time," Apollo said. "You'll stand trial for—"

"Apollo!" Tigh cried, turning and grabbing Apollo's arm.

The small group whirled to see the bridge doors opening once more and a flood of blackshirted Council Security guards streaming in. Dozens of them, their rifles all aimed at Apollo, Gar'Tokk, Athena, Tigh, and the two silent Nomen fighters.

It was sixty on six, at the very least.

The Nomen growled and got into a fighting posture, but Apollo stayed them.

"We can't fight these odds," he said. "They're heavily armed."

"So, who's going to the brig now?" Aron asked, laughing long and hard.

He held up the communicator with the red button, turning it from side to side. "Now you know what it's for," he told Athena. The guards rushed forward, disarming the entire group, stripping the laser boles from the Nomen's belts, everyone's pistols, even finding the Nomen's hidden knives in microns.

She glanced behind him, where Baltar lurked behind one of the consoles. She watched Baltar look suspiciously at the guards, cringing in apprehension. She could see the conflict on Baltar's face. Should he join Apollo and the others, or should he stay with Aron?

Baltar slowly stood, gathering his cloak. "Ahem," he said, clearing his throat. "If I could be so bold," he told Aron, "I could have told you this was coming."

Aron appeared to notice Baltar for the first time in centars. "You could have —" he said, a puzzled expression on his face.

"Yes," Baltar said. "Of course. Very handy that you were able to call the guards so quickly. I admire a careful planner."

"Oh," Aron said, smiling. "Yes, I always plan ahead."

"In fact," Baltar said, sidling around the console, a smarmy smile on his dark face, "I haven't seen that kind of strategy in a long time. Letting them escape like that, then reeling them back in? Aron, it's masterful!"

Athena's brows knit. Baltar! Turning tail again! Well, who would have expected anything different? She looked over at Apollo, who was staring at Baltar, his mouth open.

"I am a master," Aron said, proudly raising his chin over his thin, wrinkled neck, face full of shining arrogance.

"Yes, now their fate will really hurt. Their only consolation is that they'll be destroyed together," Baltar said.

"Of course!" Sire Aron cried triumphantly. Then uncertainty crossed his face. "How did you know?" he asked Baltar.

"I have my ways," Baltar said. "Don't forget my yahrens of experience."

"Ah," Aron said, then he appeared to think a moment. "Look," he said to Baltar. "I need someone to assist me here for the time being. I could reward you—" he added.

Baltar grinned. "Precisely what I had in mind. I must thank you heartily," he said. "I've been waiting to see Apollo… and Athena… in this position for many long yahrens."

Aron put his head back and laughed once more. "Baltar!" Apollo cried.

With a cruel chuckle, Baltar strode to Apollo's side.

Apollo stared at Baltar, stunned.

Baltar leaned close and Apollo nearly spit in his face, but Baltar said, "Do not, Apollo," and looked deeply in his eyes.

Apollo couldn't believe Baltar's treachery—but then again, yes he could. It was his own foolish trust that he couldn't believe. Letting Baltar out like that, with only the tracking device on his ankle. Letting Baltar do whatever

he wished. He should have had him in the brig the entire time, under dozens of guards with mind-shields to protect them from Baltar's evil influence.

Apollo looked over at the others. They were glaring furiously at Baltar. Tigh struggled with the guards who held him, crying, "Baltar! I'll kill you!"

Baltar merely smiled at Tigh. "Apollo," he whispered again. "How does it feel?"

Apollo couldn't believe that Baltar had done it: again.

"Yes, I'll laugh when you meet your doom, Apollo!" Baltar cried. Then he gave his best maniacal, insane, vicious laugh, looking at all the guards, glaring with his glittering eyes.

Again, loudly, Baltar announced, "A sectare of rejoicing has come!" Then he drew his arm back and drove his fist deep into Apollo's midsection.

Grunting, Apollo doubled over as every ounce of breath left him and his eyes watered from the pain. "Baltar!" he said—in agony. Baltar snatched his laser as Apollo doubled over.

Baltar didn't respond at all, turning back to the traitorous Council leader. "Hail Sire Aron! Victory is yours!" Baltar cried. He raised his fist in a crude salute. Apollo looked up through his pain-hazed eyes and saw that Baltar had one arm hidden in his cloak, and he was certain that hidden hand held the laser.

The guards led the group away to the brig, and even as they left, Baltar stood waving farewell, the pistol secreted somewhere in his robes, grinning evilly. Why had Baltar pretended to be Apollo's friend? Just to escape the brig?

Probably. And now it looked like he was well on' his way to making another try for control of the *Galactica*.

Now it was Aron who was going to have to watch his back.

In sickbay, Cassi and Doctor Salik struggled to save Sheba, brought back by Gar'Tokk's Noman companion.

"Her body has suffered incredible trauma," the Doctor told Cassi. "I've eased it somewhat, but we have no more tissue regenerators. She should have received treatment right away. All those centars in that cell—"

Cassi looked at the Doctor, fully aware that Sheba's life hung in the balance. They had done all that anyone could do. All that was left was to wait to see if Sheba's body could heal itself.

The Noman who had brought Sheba stood impassively by the door. Then he seemed to hear something that neither Cassi nor the Doctor could hear.

"Gar'Tokk calls!" he exclaimed. They looked at him in alarm. His terrifying, remorseless face completely changed, suddenly filling with remorse and traces of fear.

"Ohhhhh," the Noman said. "I must go."

"Very good," the Doctor said, shaking his head. He turned to Cassi, raising his brows. "Having him around here isn't helping things, standing there like some brooding lunatic," he told her.

"I know," Cassi said in a low voice. "I know he's here to help, but he's really —scary."

"Gar'Tokk! The Call!" the Noman said in the common speech, although it sounded as though the words were unfamiliar to him.

Then he turned, his cloak swirling, and strode purposefully from the sickbay.

"Well, that's that," the Doctor said. He grabbed Cassi's hand and squeezed it. "Why don't you get some rest? You've been here for centars. You've got to take care of—" and he looked down at her stomach.

"I know," Cassi said. "But Sheba—" she said, looking down at Sheba, who was now in a deep form of stasis, beyond all sight and hearing.

"Take care, Cassi," the Doctor said. "I'll watch her."

Cassi started to leave, but turned back to Doctor Salik. "I just can't believe it," she said. "I know that Sheba has… feelings… for Apollo. That's obvious to anyone."

The Doctor crossed his arms, nodding kindly. "Yes," he told Cassi. "But think of it this way. We all love Apollo."

Cassi's wide eyes filled with tears. "I know," she said.

"We all do. And what are we going to do now? I wish I could help him," she held her hands out in a helpless gesture. "I can't fight them all by myself."

"Nor can I," Doctor Salik said. "But Cassi, we're healers, not warriors. Let the warriors—"

"Sire Aron has all our warriors under guard! He's going to kill Apollo, and Athena and Tigh and—"

"Cassi, there's always hope," Doctor Salik said. "I have seen more than a few miracles in my time."

"I hope you're right," she said. "But I've got a hard time believing in them right now."

"I know," Doctor Salik said. "But think of Dalton!"

And at once, Dalton's face appeared in the sickbay entry. "Mom!" she cried, running toward Cassi.

"Dalton!" Cassi cried in return, running to her daughter and holding her close. Cassi was so overwhelmed that at first she didn't fully register the group who was bringing Commander Cain's body into sickbay.

Truly, it was a miracle. Dalton was back safe, whole and sound. Then, Cassi's eyes came to rest upon the larger miracle. Boomer, Bojay, Trays and Troy all carried a limp, badly wounded man into sick bay. A man Cassi knew well—in fact, she had always loved Cain, and had a special spot in

her heart for him. A great warrior, and a powerful, masterful, deeply loving —

"Dalton!" Cassi cried. "How—what—?"

"We found him on the *Pegasus*," Dalton said. "That's how far we went out, mother. To the edge of the universe and back."

Eyes wide, Cassi grabbed Dalton's hand and ran to Cain's side.

"Lords of Kobol," she said, recognizing the many wounds that tore Cain's body. Each of them—potentially fatal.

"Cain," Doctor Salik said. "But how?"

Troy and Trays told the doctor of their discovery, and Dalton added how she had been there when Cain had taken a breath, and they'd realized that he was not dead and preserved, but alive. They had brought him back.

"You're heroes!" Cassi cried. Troy and Trays grinned.

"We're not bad either," Bojay said.

Cassi rolled her eyes, but there wasn't time for more.

She bent over Cain, realizing with a sudden sharp breath that here lay father and daughter, right beside each other, each fighting for life. Or were they? It hardly seemed as though Cain was alive—in fact, it seemed impossible that his chest moved, and that air came between his parted lips. Those wounds!

"He's—I've never seen anything like it," Doctor Salik said. "Yes, he's breathing. But he seems to be in some kind of stasis."

"That's how he survived out there for all this time," Cassi said, voice quiet with wonder.

The Doctor looked up at her. She read his expression from long years of experience. The Doctor did not believe that Cain would survive for much longer.

Lowering her eyes, she said a brief prayer to herself, then she looked over at Dalton once more, checking for any injuries, making sure that Dalton was really back whole and well. And said another prayer of thanks that Dalton was not the one on that table. Oh, Lords of Kobol—Cassi looked over at Sheba once more.

Sheba and Cain were laying side by side. And only the Gods knew if either of them would make it.

She looked past Dalton for the first time since the pilots had brought Cain into sickbay. There were Troy and Trays, home safe. And Boomer and Bojay, standing by. They were all together, all her favorite pilots.

Except for one. Right now, she couldn't bear to think of Apollo—she just had to pray that he would be safe. And Starbuck.

She and Doctor Salik had worked together for a long time. He seemed to read her expression, and said, "Don't worry about Starbuck, either. I'm sure he's on his way back. There's no way two who are so dear to you could get lost in that cloud."

"You're right," Cassi said, as she bent over Cain again. "But I was never really worried about Starbuck. He can take care of himself."

"The rest of you!" Salik cried. "Out! Can't you see we've got work to do?"

With hasty farewells, Dalton, Boomer, Trays and Bojay retreated.

But Starbuck was lost. He followed Boomer's ion trail as far as he could into the *Ur* cloud, but they only led so far. Soon, everything faded away and Starbuck was piloting his Viper through nothing but blind whiteness.

He swore, slamming his fist on the controls.

"Dalton!" he cried. "Where are you?"

The words echoed out into nothing.

Then, looking at his directional display, he shook his head and blinked. Every micron, it changed. One moment, it looked like he'd barely left the

Galactica, and the next, it told him he was at the very edge of the universe, wildly switching back and forth before his astonished eyes.

"You are completely screwed," he told himself.

And his fuel was running low.

He wracked his brain for ideas. "Come on, Starbuck," he told himself. "You know how you can find her. Just…"

"Starbuck," came a deep, echoing voice. Starbuck hit his helmet. Who in the stars was out here, chatting it up over the comm?

That sure wasn't Troy's voice, he thought.

"The blood calls you," the voice said.

Starbuck swore under his breath because he knew the voice then.

"Gar'Tokk!" he cried, slapping his helmet once more. "How'd you—"

"Come back," the voice said, suddenly fading.

"Yeah, right," Starbuck said. Not only had he seen no sign of Dalton or Troy, not only was he lost in the middle of nowhere, running low on fuel, he had no clue as to where "back" was right then. This Gar'Tokk sure knew how to throw a party, Starbuck thought.

Come back! Maybe Starbuck could sprout wings out of his ass, ditch his Viper, and fly back like a birdie.

Then, out of nowhere, a huge ship came storming at Starbuck's Viper, buzzing him like he and Apollo had done in the old sectares, to see who'd pee his pants first.

"Holy—" Starbuck swore, ducking.

The ship banked and turned back as Starbuck craned his neck to see it. Then it came to a stop, hovering and flashing its lights. He knew that ship. It was Valor of the Sky, and it was telling him to turn around. Starbuck thought

that ship had been lost when the *Pegasus* went down, but he guessed he was wrong.

Starbuck did turn around whistling to himself. That thing took off like a shot and Starbuck hit his burners, flaming after it with everything he had.

"I don't know where you came from, buddy," he said. "But I always figured, don't look a gift Boray in the mouth."

As Starbuck did what he knew best, piloting his Viper following the trail of the giant, sentient ship, banking and turning in its path, he said, "that Boray'll take off your fingers." Before he knew it, the *Galactica* hove into sight, and the image of Valor faded right before his eyes.

Starbuck didn't understand it at all, and he still was torn up with worry over Dalton, but he guided his Viper into the landing bay, praying silently that'd see be all right, and ready to find that Noman and send his ugly face straight to the halls of Hades.

Things weren't right, Starbuck thought as he struggled to find a bay for his Viper. It looked like every squadron was grounded. Had they found a way out while he'd been out looking for Dalton, Troy and that hothead Trays? Why were the patrols all down?

He climbed from his Viper, shaking his head, and Bojay came running up.

"Starbuck!" Bojay cried. "Get your ass down here!"

"Thanks for the friendly greeting," Starbuck told Bojay.

"Dalton's back," Bojay said.

Starbuck's anger fled in a micron. Grinning, he slapped Bojay's back. "That's the best news I've heard in yahrens," he said. "What happened?"

"She's okay," Bojay said, meaning Dalton. "But Starbuck, the three of them found what's left of the *Pegasus*! And Starbuck, you're not going to believe this—they found Commander Cain!"

"Cain?" Starbuck asked, his blue eyes flying wide.

"His body—out there?"

"He's still alive, Starbuck. He's in sickbay."

"Frack!" Starbuck cried. "Sheba—is she—"

"She's right there too. We were just there."

"The two of them. Do you think—"

"Don't know, buddy. Nobody knows."

Starbuck thought about this a moment. "Come on, let's find Dalton—" he said, grabbing Bojay's shoulder and turning him around.

But Bojay stayed where he was. "Starbuck," he said. "We're in deep daggit crap."

"What? Dalton's—"

"No, not that. While you were out there burning fuel, everything's gone crazy," Bojay said.

"What else is new?" Starbuck asked, grinning. "I mean, besides the miraculous return of my daughter, some fresh food and fuel for a chance and—"

"I mean, deep daggit—" Bojay said, and he looked over his shoulder, saying, "Oh-oh."

Starbuck turned, and he said the exact same thing.

Because a full squadron of Council Security blackshirts was storming into the pod, rifles raised, hard looks on their faces, and they were headed straight for Starbuck and Bojay. They didn't look very happy to see them, either, and as Starbuck raised his hands while they grabbed his pistol, he thought, Bojay couldn't have been more right. Deep daggit crap, and getting deeper by the micron.

"Thanks for the warning," he said to Bojay as they were marched off.

"Sorry, man," Bojay said. "I tried to tell you!"

One of the guards slammed Bojay in the small of his back for that comment, so both of them remained sullen and silent all the way to the brig.

They threw Starbuck and Bojay in the cell and slammed the door. Starbuck stumbled in first, and Bojay hit him in a micron, throwing both of them to the floor.

"Get off me!" Starbuck cried. He got to his knees and got his bearings.

"Just one big happy family," he said, looking around the cell. Apollo was standing there, acting like he wanted to help or something, and behind him stood Gar'Tokk and two of the biggest, ugliest Nomen Starbuck had ever seen.

Tigh and Athena crouched in the far corner of the cell. Starbuck immediately realized why. There wasn't enough room for the group to begin with, and Starbuck and Bojay were definitely uncomfortable party crashers.

"I guess we can flip a cubit to see who gets the cot," Starbuck wisecracked. "I take heads."

"Starbuck!" Apollo cried in frustration. "Can't you be serious for a centon?" But his face showed joy at seeing his oldest, best friend.

Briefly, Tigh and Athena explained what had happened since Starbuck's flight into the *Ur* cloud. "Baltar put his tail between his legs and licked Aron's hand," Tigh said in disgust. "He was celebrating because they're going to shoot us all in a few centars."

Starbuck shook his head. "That's just great," he said. "The way I always wanted to go—lined up in a firing squad with Baltar pulling the trigger."

Then Gar'Tokk stepped forward, squeezing everyone aside. He grabbed Starbuck's shoulder in his vice-like hand.

"You heard the call," he said in his deep voice.

"Yeah," Starbuck said. "I heard it."

"Good," the Noman growled. "I am glad you are not deaf, Starbuck." Then he ordered Apollo and Starbuck to sit on the cot along with Athena, and arranged everyone else around the tiny cell, each in turn.

"Nomen are used to fitting into small spaces. All these yahrens in human ships—" he said after he was finished. Then he seated himself in the center of the cell, closed his eyes, and appeared to begin to meditate, humming to himself in a low, rumbling voice.

Starbuck scooted as far away from Apollo as he could without making Athena uncomfortable. Apollo, on his part, did the same, glaring at Starbuck.

They sat there for a long time, neither saying a word.

"I'm glad Dalton's okay," Apollo said at last.

"Yeah," Starbuck said. "Those blackshirts didn't give me a chance to see her."

"You heard about Cain," Apollo said.

"Yeah, I heard," Starbuck said, looking over at Bojay and nodding. "Bojay spilled it."

"They found the *Pegasus* out there," Apollo said. "It was some kind of—"

"Bojay said," Starbuck said, crossing his arms. Again, there was a long, uncomfortable silence.

Starbuck broke first. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice reluctant but sincere.

Apollo didn't respond for a long while. Slowly, he reached over and touched Starbuck's arms, and looked in his eyes.

"You look better," Apollo said. He pointed at Starbuck's eyebrow, where the bruise he'd given Starbuck had shrunk to the size of a crawlon. Unfortunately, it had turned the color of a crawlon, too: blackish-purple.

"So do you," Starbuck said. Then he started to grin. "Not really," he said. "Your nose still looks like a triad ball!"

"Starbuck!" Apollo cried, punching him in the arm.

"Ow!" Starbuck said, rubbing his muscles and looking back at Apollo in irritation.

"I always said we'd be happiest if we went out together in a blaze of glory," Apollo said.

Despite himself, Starbuck grinned—he never did like jokes when real death was involved—and slapped Apollo's back. Hard.

Athena watched the whole scene in amazement. Nothing would ever keep those two apart. But, she thought grimly, if Aron got his way, and it was hard to see how he wouldn't, the way things were, it looked like soon they'd all be spending a lot of time together. In eternity.

Their cell door opened. "All right," the guard said in a vicious tone. He looked like he was thrilled at the idea that Apollo, Gar'Tokk, Athena, Starbuck, Tigh and the others were under his control.

"You're all going to fry," he added as he marched them out of the cell, one by one.

"Let's make a break for it," Starbuck whispered to Apollo. But his face changed as he bent down and raised as he left the cell, looking around to see what looked like every single Council Security blackshirt who'd ever lived lining the corridor.

"I don't think that would work," Apollo shot back. Gar'Tokk growled as one of the blackshirts jammed his rifle in the Noman's side.

"You'll pay," the Noman warned.

"Right," the guard said. "Maybe you can bite my ankles after they blow your stinking ugly head off your body."

All up and down the hall, the guards laughed, viciously.

Apollo saw the looks they gave him, and he understood a little more about why these men could follow the cruel, evil orders of Sire Aron so willingly. They resented Apollo. Some even hated him.

They were like small, petty men everywhere, Apollo thought. The only things they cared about were cubits, and loyalty was just a word that could be bought with shining metal.

Right now, Sire Aron was paying them—Apollo guessed he was paying them pretty well—and they had dreams of power and glory.

They didn't like the hard life aboard the *Galactica*, all the sacrifice and hardship.

They probably didn't understand much about the mission, or if they did, maybe they just couldn't see that far ahead. As far as they were concerned, their loyalty meant to the people who promised them cubits, women, food and drink. And maybe a case of fumarellos.

They weren't bad men, Apollo thought, but they weren't good. He thought about things in a slightly different way as they were marched down the hall.

Someone leaned forward and spat right in Apollo's face. Proudly, Apollo wiped the disgusting slime away with his sleeve.

"Fracking bastard!" Starbuck cried, leaping at the offender.

Starbuck was driven back with blows on his back and harsh words.

"I'll pay that one back," Starbuck muttered, even though he was now limping in pain.

It seemed like they would never run the gauntlet, but at last they were out, being marched along, completely surrounded on their way to the Council Chambers. Apollo found his mind strangely clear, even though he knew that it wasn't possible for Troy, Trays, Boomer and Dalton to break them out of this situation—not just the four of them.

"Be brave," he said, turning to his friends.

"Nomen are always brave," Gar'Tokk responded. "We go like men of honor!"

Somehow, this lifted Apollo's heart, and he smiled.

A warrior never gave in, Apollo thought. He was never a coward; he didn't shrink in the face of danger and death. That was the only kind of man—or woman—who could defend *Galactica* and lead them to the fabled planet Earth.

"By the Lords of Kobol," Apollo said, turning to his companions as they were shoved into the Council Chambers. "We know who we are, and what we stand for."

"To *Galactica*!" Athena cried. Soon, Tigh and Bojay joined her.

Starbuck raised his fist, and they walked in to face their enemies, heads held high.

Sire Aron didn't look so high and mighty, Apollo thought. In fact, it looked almost like he was unsure of himself. His eyes darted from the face of Council member to Council member, as if he was looking for something.

And Apollo, becoming a better reader of men's faces by the centar, saw that not every Council member was happy about this development and these proceedings.

Some muttered between themselves. There was no point in looking to any of them for support, Apollo told himself. There never had been. He looked at his friends and his heart filled with warmth and love for them.

Well, maybe he and Starbuck were going to out together after all. Neither one of them had ever pictured it like this. But what man chose the centar and time of death for himself anyway? The only ones who ever did were flat-out cowards. Or heroes, like the real Commander Cain. And Cain—Cain was still alive!

So which are you, Apollo? he asked himself. He already knew the answer. Hadn't Adama always told him to avoid pointless rhetorical questions?

You'll see *Adama soon enough, Apollo, and know for certain if the mission will succeed without you*. At least there was Troy to carry on. Apollo silently prayed that he would be ready: he knew that he was.

"You stand here under sentence of death," Sire Aron intoned.

"We do not recognize that sentence," Apollo said.

"I fail to see what you're going to do about it!" Aron cried, indicating the dozens of Council troops with their weapons bristling at the prisoners.

"You can murder us, Aron," Apollo said. "But who'll look at you and see a leader? Jinkrat was a leader. An honest man. Not you."

Sire Aron appeared to be taken aback at this, and he said, "I never said I was—"

"Actions speak louder than words," Apollo said. "And appearances lie—just like you, Aron!"

The Council members shifted and turned to each other, beginning to argue and dispute. But Apollo knew that it wouldn't matter. All of the guards were in Sire Aron's pay, following his orders. As always the Council were behind the curve, not even realizing their own danger. Aron could turn on them in a micron. This was the man who'd manipulated and betrayed Jinkrat, who'd thrown Sheba in the brig to die, and who'd planned to cut off *Galactica's* air supply.

What did the Council think he intended to do with them? What need had he of them after Apollo and the others were murdered?

It was all for show, to maintain order among the people for the moments that Sire Aron needed to complete his evil plan—whatever it was.

For a micron, Apollo considered not saying anything more. Why not get it over with? But then he thought again—he remembered Valor of the Sky, out of nowhere, saving Troy, Dalton and Trays from certain death, leading them to the *Pegasus* and the Cylon ship.

Then, he remembered the greatest miracle of all, clinging to the barest shred of life down in sickbay. Cain.

Cain couldn't have been found for no purpose. There had to be a reason. The hands of the Gods were plain to be seen. He looked over at Gar'Tokk, who was examining his large, pointed fingernails as if he could not be more bored by Sire Aron and his pronouncements.

Then, Gar'Tokk raised his huge, bearded face and growled, "Why not just kill us now. Enough talk!"

"You'll get your wish soon enough, Noman," Aron said. "For now, we must obey the laws." He turned to the Council and said, "I will now read the charges against these criminals."

He withdrew a data pad from his robes and squinted at it, and began to read.

"Apollo," he said. "For countless crimes against the *Galactica* and its people, and above all, for the murder of Jinkrat, you are sentenced to die."

"Very original," Starbuck said behind his hand, leaning close to Apollo. Apollo couldn't help but laugh.

"Athena! You, too, are sentenced to die, for conspiring with your brother to take food and resources from the people of *Galactica*, and for the killing of innocent guards who were assigned to look after Apollo, the prisoner."

"Oh, brother," Starbuck said. "What's next?"

"Tigh! You are sentenced to die for plotting with the others to destroy the *Galactica*."

"You could have fooled me," Tigh grumbled. "When will this travesty be over with?"

"Gar'Tokk," Aron went on, looking up briefly at the Noman, whose teeth were bared. The Noman surveyed the room in disgust, then drew his hood over his head, veiling his bearded face. "You are an alien, and thus not subject to the laws of our people, but you have murdered, stolen, and in all

other ways aided these traitors in their rebellion against the people of the *Galactica*. You and your barbarian companions will die."

"Rebellion!" Starbuck cried. "What would you call this mess?"

"Starbuck!" Aron cried. "Remain silent."

Starbuck crossed his arms and rolled his eyes. "I'll die of old age before he finishes," he said under his breath.

"Bojay," Aron continued. "You have forfeited your rights as a Colonial Warrior by assisting these traitors. You, too, are sentenced to die."

"You can kiss my—" Bojay said, rushing forward, but he was silenced by a vicious blow to his head, sinking to the floor. Starbuck and Apollo immediately knelt by his side.

"You stinking, lousy—" Starbuck cried, but he fell silent as dozens of rifles came within inches of his head.

"Now," Aron said, lowering his head and glaring at them, "You will approach the dais and submit to your sentences."

"No last words?" Starbuck asked. "I always wanted to make a touching speech."

"No!" Aron interrupted, stepping forward. "Bring them—now. Let's get this over with."

"More pressing matters?" Starbuck continued. "Like combing your hair? Arranging—"

"Silence!" Sire Aron cried. "Step forward, prisoners, and meet your fate."

Reluctantly, all of them fighting and struggling, the group was marched to the dais. Starbuck looked over at Apollo in alarm. Apollo, alone, seemed calm and undisturbed. Even GarTokk and the other Nomen were growling and snarling at their tormentors.

The firing squad assembled. Everyone looked down at them. Apollo took Athena and Starbuck's hands. Even the Nomen looked between each other. Apollo heard them saying a few simple words in their guttural tongue.

"Perhaps I have failed in my oath," GarTokk said to Apollo.

The firing squad raised their rifles.

"Ready," Sire Aron said. He was smiling.

"No," Apollo told GarTokk. "You are faithful. You have—"

"Aim," Aron said.

But before he could say another word, the doors to the Council Chambers burst open.

"Aron!" cried an old, very familiar voice.

Baltar, laden with weapons, a laser pistol in each hand. Troy, Dalton, Boomer and Trays were behind them, and half a dozen other pilots, all ready for action.

Baltar! And he clearly hadn't come to make small talk or to massage Aron's bloated ego. He'd chosen this moment to take command from Aron, but the warriors were with him. How? why? And there was a small figure beside Baltar. A large white bandage wrapped the boy's head, but Apollo would have recognized those freckles anywhere. Koren! Awake and alive!

"Give them up, Aron," Baltar demanded. There was nothing of the old, cowardly Baltar here.

Apollo stared at the dark man. Baltar had changed—again. That betrayal on the bridge. Baltar lied again, but he'd lied… thank the Lords of Kobol. For once in his life, he'd lied in the service of good, not of evil. Baltar's face suddenly shone with courage. He looked like a true member of the Council —he looked like the great Lord he could once have been.

The Council immediately turned to each other, all talking at once. The Security Guards appeared to not know what to do. Sire Aron stood, frozen,

for a bare micron.

He leapt forward, crying, "Kill the intruders!"

But Baltar was quicker. Rushing to the dais, he pulled Koren by the hand and raised the boy's arm high.

"Listen!" he cried. "Listen to this child—do not listen to me."

Then, the picture of kindness, Baltar knelt beside the boy, nodding. Apollo saw Baltar's lips move. Koren smiled up at Baltar, and in a small, thin voice, started to speak.

"Apollo didn't kill my father," Koren said. "My dad died to save me and Apollo."

The Council was immediately abuzz.

Baltar stood, imperiously, and hushed them. The guards hesitated.

"Wait!" Baltar ordered them. And they did.

"Apollo and my dad made peace. Sure, they had a big fight. But when that guy shot my dad, my dad jumped in front of him. I saw it, right before—well, I don't remember after that."

"Koren!" Apollo cried, but he wasn't able to move farther than a step. The guards' rifles were still trained on all of them, able to fire at any moment.

Murmurs rippled through the crowd like a stone thrown into water.

"He's confused!" Aron cried. "He's been injured—why, who'd take a boy out of sickbay like that? Are you going to trust this old liar, Baltar? Our greatest enemy? Responsible for the destruction of Caprica? Friend of the —"

"I'm not lying now, Aron," Baltar bellowed. "I am telling the truth! Go on," he said to Koren.

Koren took a deep breath. "Well, when I was in sickbay, this guy came and got me." He pointed straight at Aron. "He said he was bringing me to my dad."

"Koren, I was just trying to help," Aron said. He looked around, gesturing for people to understand.

"The truth!" Apollo cried. "Tell the truth!"

But Aron didn't. No longer able to contain himself, he rushed at Baltar, pushing Koren roughly aside, and grappling with the smaller man. Soon, Aron had Baltar off balance, and had grabbed one of his laser pistols. Shoving Baltar viciously in the ribs, Aron whirled to face the prisoners.

"You die now, Apollo!" he cried, aiming the pistol at Apollo's body.

Troy, Dalton, Trays, Boomer and the other warriors rushed forward. Baltar, recovering, was up and grappling with Aron, forcing the laser blast astray. It hit the Council's seal, splitting it into two neat halves that crashed to the floor.

A few guards rushed forward to defend Aron, but more guards stood aside, their rifles lowered. In the confusion, Apollo nodded to the others, and he and Gar'Tokk ran, leading them off the dais. Apollo guided Koren to what seemed like the best place, behind one of the large, sturdy Council seats. Then, Apollo and Gar'Tokk grappled with some guards who were hesitating, disarming them in moments. Now armed, the former prisoners turned to face the melee.

Baltar was struggling with Aron, who had grabbed Baltar from behind.

"Come on!" Apollo cried. At the last possible moment, Apollo reached the struggling group and deflected a guard's rifle, aimed straight at Baltar.

Soon the chamber was filled with blue laser blasts, smoke, and the sound of screaming fighters.

Koren ran from his hiding place to. Apollo grabbed Baltar's arm, Koren took the other, and they both led him toward the door. A brief glance back

showed that Gar'Tokk, the other Nomen, Athena, Tigh, Boomer and Bojay had formed an offensive wedge, backs together with Dalton, Troy and Trays, and they had were moving the wedge slowly forward, laying down heavy fire, slowly, but surely, making their way through the crowd.

They were within yards of the door—Apollo could see it. "Come on," he said again to a limping Baltar.

"We can make it!" Koren cried.

Baltar smiled at the boy, then looked at Apollo. His dark eyes met Apollo's, growing wide. There was no time for words, but for the first time, Apollo really trusted Baltar. All of Baltar's terrible anger, his resentment, and his selfish greed were gone. It was as if Baltar had been purified, in some unknowable way, and all the yahrens of plotting and betrayal had been washed away. Baltar's face was no longer dark and brooding. It shone as if it was lit within, with the goodness that lay within him, though it had been buried deep, for so many long yahrens.

"Apollo—" Baltar said, but they were all stopped short. Aron stood in their way, backed by half a dozen guards.

"You die now!" Aron said.

"No!" Koren cried. He rushed forward.

As if he was in a dream, Apollo raised his pistol, but too slowly. He saw Baltar stepping in front of Koren, saw Aron firing, and instinctively closed his eyes against the blast that was about to come, but it never came. Instead, he felt a body hitting him, and as he opened his eyes, realized that it was Baltar who was slumping back.

Koren cried out again. With a wild yell, Starbuck jumped in front of them and decked Sire Aron with a single, huge blow to his face that landed in a spray of blood.

Apollo supported Baltar under his arms. When Aron fell, the guards behind him lost their courage and turned around, running for the door.

At once, the firing lessened and the immediate danger past, Apollo lowered Baltar gently to the floor.

Koren knelt, tears dripping from his nose, shaking his head and saying, "No, no."

There was no doubting the meaning of the huge, burned wound in Baltar's chest, but Baltar's eyes were still open, and his mouth moved, although no words came out.

Apollo, tears suddenly in his eyes, bent close to the old traitor, former great Lord of the Council of Twelve.

"Baltar," Apollo said.

Baltar tried to raise himself, but sank back into Apollo's arms. He smiled at Koren, then a cough wracked his torn body. Everyone gathered around. For once, Starbuck had nothing to say. Apollo glanced up at him, and Starbuck's face was filled with wonder and sadness. Athena leaned close, as did Tigh, and even Gar'Tokk and the other Nomen, standing behind the kneeling boy, Koren.

"I did—" Baltar said, haltingly.

"You did," Apollo said.

Looking down, Apollo saw that Baltar still clutched the laser pistol he'd stolen from Apollo on the bridge—it seemed like yahrens before. He touched Baltar's hand, and closed the fingers gently around the pistol.

"You keep it, Baltar," Apollo said. "It's a warrior's weapon."

"Do you think they'll choose me as the new member of the Council?" Baltar said, his eyes shining as if he saw right through Apollo and the others to something that lay far beyond, deep in space.

"Sure," Apollo said. "I can't think of a better choice."

Baltar's eyes fluttered shut. His lips curled upward in a peaceful smile. "Good," he said in a whisper. "It feels… wonderful."

And with a final breath, his head fell gently against Apollo's arm.

But not a soul who stood near rejoiced. Not even Tigh. Not even Starbuck, who knelt respectfully beside Apollo as they all linked hands and joined in prayer as Koren wept, softly, touching Baltar's face and hair.

None would forget that moment. Nor did any of them notice the skulking form that crept from the Council chambers, like a fleeing bilgerat: Aron.

Chapter Eleven

THE FRIENDS marched as one to the bridge to retake control of the *Galactica* and the fleet.

When they arrived, they found the bridge in disarray. Starbuck took a look around, whistling under his breath.

"That Aron was a real Boray," he muttered. There were scraps of cloth, pieces of destroyed equipment, and shards of metal everywhere.

"Looks like he had a tantrum," Tigh commented.

Apollo nodded, wondering what could have caused the incident.

But Sire Aron wasn't there. Apollo hoped that the warriors had found him and thrown him in the brig—the same cell where they'd all suffered. The Council members had regained their senses at last, offering to marshal the Council troops and do a full reconnaissance of those who remained loyal after the rebellion, sending them out on a cleanup mission to find Aron's few remaining supporters in their hiding places and crannies.

"There's something flashing on the console," Athena said, pointing at Tigh's usual station.

"It's a recording," Tigh said.

Apollo leaned close, his eyes narrowing.

"It may tell us what happened," he said. "Play it."

The screen flashed blue, and Baltar's face appeared.

"I must be brief," he said. "Sire Aron is… otherwise occupied." Baltar looked over his shoulder. In the background came sounds of rage. Briefly, they gathered that Sire Aron had encountered some token resistance to Apollo's impending execution from a council member—they heard a tremulous, elderly voice begging for reconsideration.

"So that was what did it—" Tigh said.

"It's all over now," Apollo said. He gathered the others to listen to Baltar's final message.

"If you are hearing this," Baltar said quickly, "That means we succeeded, but I am no longer… among us."

Apollo took Athena's hand and squeezed it tight. Brother and sister looked at each other, quiet respect and grief passing between them. Grief—for Baltar! No one could believe it, but that was what each one felt in their hearts.

"Apollo, now I will warn you," Baltar said, his face darkening. "In these last few centars, I have seen more clearly than in yahrens. There is much you must know, but it is for your ears—Apollo. Your ears alone."

Tigh stopped the recording instantly. Apollo looked at the others.

"I suppose," he said. "I suppose we should respect his wishes."

Each of them nodded, and in respect, they turned their backs, and moved far enough from the console so that Apollo could stand alone, and they would not hear.

Apollo hesitated a moment, then began the recording again.

"You believe that you are going to have a child," Baltar said. "This is untrue. Cassiopeia carries no child born of man. She has been… impregnated… but by no human. It is Iblis' child that she bears in her body. Protect her, Apollo. Help save her from the dark forces that threaten to consume her without her knowledge."

Apollo's heart jumped in his chest. "Cassi's baby!" he said in an agonized whisper.

He leaned closer to the console, staring at the last reflection of Baltar, the ancient enemy and the fast friend, in wonder.

"Apollo, there is more," Baltar said, once again looking over his shoulder. "I must be brief. This time of respite is fast approaching its end." The yelling in the background was reaching a crescendo, the crashes and sounds of tearing and shredding came to a peak, then slowed.

"The traitor, Aron," Baltar said. "He is no minion of the Cylons. Iblis is… aware of him. He approves."

Baltar scowled. "But he is none of Iblis' doing. His crude manipulations are nothing but the hallmark of a greedy, evil man. I won't even give him the credit that I'd give to myself. He cares only for cubits and luxury and his own needs. Destroy him, Apollo! If you have not already."

Apollo nodded. He remembered Jinkrat then—those few brief moments where they'd stood as one.

All gone—Koren an orphan and the fleet in disarray because of one man's greed and manipulation. But Apollo was not like Baltar. He would not destroy Aron. He would put him on trial—with Koren as the unanswerable accusing witness.

"And Apollo—I know of the Cylon fuel cells that Troy brought back. Have a care with them. They will be of value. Not to your reactors, but perhaps you may find a way out of this trap with them. They are—quite powerful."

Baltar's eyes went wide. "I'm free now, Apollo," he said. "Free at last, after so many yahrens. I'll give you one piece of advice," he said.

Apollo waited. A shadow of Baltar's former darkness crossed his face.

"Don't treat your soul as I treated mine. I was a lonely man, Apollo. I let it consume me. I let the darkness eat me alive. I never meant—" and Baltar's voice became thick with emotion. The corners of his mouth lowered in a deep scowl. "I never meant for any of this to happen. But now I go to meet my fate. In honor, Apollo.

For the Lords of Kobol, I go to meet what fate the Gods have in store for me."

"You died bravely, Baltar," Apollo whispered.

Then Baltar grimaced one last time, looking back on his shoulder. All at once, he spoke in a rapid burst, very low. "But your fate approaches too, Apollo. You must meet it with every ounce of courage that you have. Your father never faced such a challenge. The Cylons are coming, Apollo. Coming in all their might. And I know better than any man how weak the fleet is now. May the Light of the Lords of Kobol shine on you. I will see you no—" And then the screen went black.

In shock, Apollo stood there a moment, digesting what Baltar had said. Cassi's baby! It belonged to Iblis? How? why? What had brought this terrible thing in their midst. Hadn't there been enough death—enough madness?

Then Tigh's voice broke Apollo from his reverie. "We've got a ship, incoming," he said.

Apollo whirled to face the screen, seeing a small shuttle marking an erratic path toward the *Galactica*.

"We've got its registry," Tigh said. "It's the long-lost barge. And Aron's on it."

"Aron!" Athena cried. "Hasn't he made enough trouble?"

"It's just the barge," Tigh said. "Let's tow him in and put paid to his account."

"I don't think that'll work just now," Starbuck said, pointing at the heads-up display to Tigh's side. "He's brought some friends with him."

"Cylons!" Athena cried.

Baltar's warning echoed in Apollo's ears. The Cylons are coming in all their might. But there was no time to tell the others. Now that the Cylons were here there was no need to tell.

Like vicious red Cylon eyes, the markings of dozens, soon hundreds, of Cylon fighters blinked on the screen in phalanx after phalanx.

"Launch all Vipers!" Apollo cried. Tigh snapped to his station, issuing commands immediately throughout the *Galactica* and the fleet.

"Let's go!" Starbuck yelled, grabbing Dalton's arm. Starbuck, Dalton, Troy, Trays, Bojay and Boomer, *Galactica's* best, took off at full speed, headed for their Vipers.

"Blue Squadron, Yellow Squadron," Tigh called. Then he grew quiet, and a shadow went over his face.

He looked over at Apollo, his face a mask of alarm. "I've never seen anything like this, Commander," he said.

Apollo saw it for himself. Beyond the Cylon advance force blinked darker, larger red lights. Two, then three, in strict formation. Three Cylon basestars, and everything they had, was headed — straight for the *Galactica*.

"How did they get through into this *Ur* cloud?" Tigh wondered.

"Lords of Kobol only know," Apollo said. "Maybe they've been here with us all along."

Apollo could just imagine Iblis's utterly evil, maniacal laugh. Baltar had known! Yet he had said he was free-free at last. So, he had managed to escape the Imperious Leader's grasp, the old demon's clawlike hand that reached into his mind like evil, cancerous tentacles.

Then Aron's small craft that had led the enemy to the *Galactica* seemed to hesitate, and shudder in space. A message came through on the comm. "*Galactica*, help!" cried a desperate voice. It was none other than the traitor, Sire Aron.

Tigh quickly ordered *Galactica's* big guns to lay down covering fire, and bolts of heavy laser blasts boomed from *Galactica's* weapons array, firing up the sky beyond the small ship like glowing swords.

Apollo and Tigh watched as the small ship tried to desperately maneuver closer to the *Galactica* and freedom, but it was cut off by a group of evil-looking Cylon fighters, glittering like silver thumbnails against the *Ur* cloud.

"No!" Sire Aron cried, but that was the last thing he said.

Tigh and Apollo shuddered as the ship was strafed by Cylon fire, and it began to break up, its hull torn in a dozen places. One of the shots hit its fuel cells, and Aron's craft went up in a huge ball of fire.

"I guess we'll never know if he found them out there and was running away, or he led them here on purpose," Tigh said.

"It doesn't matter," Apollo said, shaking his head, wondering at the last, desperate end of what had once been a leader of their Council. What had his reasons been? Cubits? Power? The chance to make Apollo crawl? To take revenge for years of perceived slights at the hand of Adama? There was no way to know any longer. Aron had told his last lie.

Although, Apollo thought, considering what Baltar had told him, that Aron was no creature of Iblis', the old man had probably just been seeking a way out of the *Ur* cloud himself, or he'd been hiding in the wrong place at the wrong time when the Cylons did whatever they had to make it out of normal space to pursue the *Galactica* into the *Ur* cloud.

In their state, how could they fight this Cylon assault?

He had never seen so many of them. It had to be their entire fleet—and somehow—some way, they'd blasted themselves into the *Ur* cloud. But, Apollo thought, if they'd found a way in, there *had* to be a way out. All Apollo knew was that, as weakened as they were, the Vipers had to launch, from *Galactica* and *Daedalus*. They had to try. One final time.

"I've got to get out there," Apollo told Tigh. "You stay. Athena—" he said, turning to his sister and taking her hand. "I know you want to get back to *Daedalus*, but I need you. I've got to get out there with the other pilots."

"I know," Athena said. Tears in her eyes, she kissed Apollo's cheek, and he ran off with the scent of her hair in his nostrils, wondering if he'd ever see her again. But the time for wondering was over. Now was the time for fighting.

Like they'd never fought before.

Galactica's pilots were the bravest and the best who ever flew and ever fought. They formed a line—the Vipers had flown—a thin, glittering barrier like a strand of pearls that was all that stood between the *Galactica* and the hundreds of Cylon fighters descending on them, evil crescents shining in the night in their massive assault phalanxes.

On and on they fought, flying like as though they were guided by the Beings of Light, on raw instinct, at the ragged edge of reactions and endurance.

Starbuck targeted a Cylon fighter coming in with a second at his wing. Banking fast, Starbuck feinted, throwing the Cylon off for a micron—just enough time for Starbuck to lock on and blast the Cylon out of the strange white *Ur* cloud. Stabilizers knocked out by the blast, the other Cylon craft spun out of control.

It wasn't worth going after that one, Starbuck decided.

A whole new group was forming on his screen in the micron it took Starbuck to make that decision.

"On your tail!" came a voice in Starbuck's comm. It was Apollo!

Starbuck barely had enough time to look over his shoulder to see the laser cannon blasts ripping past his wings. He banked, running on pure instinct, and saw the brilliant golden blasts of a Viper's cannons screaming by from the opposite direction. In a flash, Apollo's Viper streaked past, and a brilliant flash signaled that he'd gotten this Cylon and put paid to that tin-can's account.

"Just like old times," Starbuck said.

"You got that, buddy," Apollo said.

"Let's go kick some more Cylon ass!" Starbuck cried, blood streaking through his veins, feeling like he and his Viper were a single, linked killing machine.

Wing to wing, they banked into the Cylon masses, wreaking havoc as they went. Pieces of destroyed Cylon fighters soon littered the space around the *Galactica* like so many pieces of hot metal confetti.

But there were so many of them. Even Starbuck and Apollo were growing exhausted. It was only a matter of time before they started making mistakes.

And soon enough, they made one, along with the other Vipers.

There was just too much going on; they didn't see the Cylon war cruiser as it slipped past—a special kind of war cruiser, meant to lock onto a battlestar in space, bore a hole in its side, and discharge hordes of waiting Cylon commandos.

The cruiser slid right through the melee, hovering close to *Galactica*, making it past the big guns easily. Those were trained on the masses of fighters—fighters intended to accomplish exactly what they did: distract the Viper squadrons and draw them away from the real trouble. *Galactica* was about to be breached.

And boarded.

Tigh looked over at Athena in horror. "We're being breached," he said.

"That's impossible," she cried, watching the battle unfold in front of her. There were so many Cylons.

The guns were about to melt into *Galactica's* hull, they were firing so rapidly. Without the Tylium, their reserves were dwindling with every breath she took. But even so—she could see it—the Viper line was holding.

How had anything slipped through? It was useless to wonder about it. It didn't really matter.

Something had slipped through. A Cylon boarding warship, tearing its way through *Galactica's* hull right that micron. Like the monsters they were, they'd spotted the wound in *Galactica's* hull made by the bomb that Jinkrat had never intended to explode in such a dangerous, vulnerable spot.

"This is critical!" Athena cried. "Our only defense is those Council guards."

Tigh looked at her, his face a mask of disgust and worry. "We might as well send old women and children down to face those Cylons," he said.

"They're all we've got," she said. "The Vipers can't pull back. They'll be picked off like flies if they turn now."

Tigh nodded. He issued the orders to the Council guards—some fighters they were. Koren the boy could do better than them, Tigh thought darkly. The guards would probably run and cower behind the Council's dais, along with all the other sniveling baby men and trembling old women.

"Boarded!" came a voice over the comm, full of desperation. Athena turned, hearing the voice even from where she stood on the bridge.

"How many do you have?" Tigh said quickly, ignoring the Council guard's alarm.

"I don't know," the Council guard said slowly. "Seventy, maybe eighty."

"Go!" Tigh said. "They're breaching on Beta Deck, right where the bomb went off."

"That means they'll come out right at the—" the guard said, pausing for long microns. "The bar!" he said, showing an unexpected knowledge of *Galactica's* engineering layout.

"Get whoever you've got, with as many weapons they have," Tigh commanded. "The Cylons must not be allowed to board *Galactica*."

"I will, President Tigh," the guard said. Then his image faded to black.

"Lords of Kobol," Tigh muttered. "Old men, women, babies, and cowards standing against the Cylons!"

Athena looked back at Tigh. Then she reached down to check her sidearm.

"We'd better be prepared for anything," she said.

Tigh also checked his pistol, nodding at her, but saying nothing. There was really nothing to be said.

Darkly, Tigh wondered how many tin cans he could take down before—

But there were more communications coming in, and before he thought too much more about the inevitable, he was back to directing the Viper battle in space. All that lay between the people of *Galactica* and the fracking Cylons —a bunch of sniveling, whining, yellow-bellied baby men dolled up in fancy black uniforms that didn't mean a thing. A bunch of cowards who'd run crying and whining at the sight of Baltar, who answered to that traitor Aron for a few cubits.

Tigh would rather have had some of those refugees from Jinkrat's rebel forces than this crowd. What would they do faced with Cylon centurions? Tigh had a pretty good idea, and it wasn't something he wanted to think much about.

Tigh's hand itched to get his pistol. He wanted nothing more than to leap down to Beta Deck and "greet" the Cylons the way they deserved.

But even the great warrior that Tigh was, this was one fray he couldn't join right away. He and Athena were bound to the bridge as long as it lasted, he thought, sighing.

The Cylons poured out of their ship like deadly insects fleeing their nest. Jumping into the bar, they encountered no one, their red eyes scanning for danger, or for prey. They had their orders. They were to take these soft, ugly humans and destroy them, keeping only a few left that their leader commanded. But then again… in their small, limited minds, there were more than a few confused tin-cans among them. The orders weren't coming through very clearly. Nothing had come through clearly since they got to this accursed place. And none of the Cylons liked very much what had been done to get them here.

Cylons didn't question orders, but there wasn't one of them—not that they thought too much about anything in any case, but they did have opinions, if anyone cared to ask, which no one ever did, including other Cylons—and if they had to sacrifice a whole Cylon battlestar just to blast a hole into this accursed corner of space or time, or whatever it was, well, most of the Cylons didn't think that seemed right. But who were they to question? A Cylon was to do and die. A Cylon seldom wondered why. If he wondered too much, the Imperious Leader would just have him decommissioned and melted down into slag.

No Cylon wanted to be slag.

So they poured onto the *Galactica* in their hundreds. Besides, it made them happy to be hunting humans.

Most of them were very excited, circuits popping and eye-beams scanning, as they poured into this strange ship. In fact, most of them had never even seen humans, but a Cylon knew a human when he saw one—that was never much of a problem. Shoot anything that looked soft and didn't shine: that was the rule.

So, the lead troops were quite happy to see soft, moving things as soon as they left the first area where they had landed.

They were happy right up until the time blue laser bolts slashed out and blasted them back into the bar, the lead troops smashing back into the others with the force of the fire.

"Humans!" one of them cried. He was having issues firing back, because his arm seemed to be missing. It was even worse when, in a rage, the centurion behind him grabbed his other arm and ripped it off, right where it was joined to his shining silver torso, tossing it back, where it landed on a whole new crowd of boarding troops, casting them all into confusion and disarray.

The ragtag defense squadron in the hall paused and cheered when the Cylons who emerged from the bar entrance fell back, wailing and squealing at their wounds.

The security guard moved his hand to caution the defenders arrayed behind him.

"This is just the first wave," he said.

"But we beat them!" one of the men cried.

"Cylons are slow," the guard said, showing unexpected insight. "But they don't really know fear. They'll be back. That ship that's breached our hull holds hundreds of them."

The motley defenders seemed to understand their situation for the first time.

"We could seal the corridor," one of them said. "I've got charges. We could toss them in and—"

"A temporary solution at best," the guard said. "They've got borers, and unlimited manpower compared to us. They'll just send in more centurions and workers. They don't care about those at all. We've got to stand and fight. It's our only chance." Grimly, he surveyed the group.

"Let's do it," one of the others said.

Soon, all were joining in a cheer.

"We've got nowhere to run," the guard told the squadron as they crouched in fighting position.

"Neither do the Cylons, sir!"

For the first time in centars, the guard smiled—and then he began to laugh, even though the menace was right there, a few yards away down the corridor. And they had only microns before the Cylons were back—smarter this time, expecting resistance, and fully prepared.

Chapter Twelve

LORDS OF Kobol!" Doctor Salik cried as the two men carried the prone form into sickbay. Baltar's body had arrived.

The men laid the body on an exam table. They were both wild-eyed; Doctor Salik thought that he recognized them from engineering. The events of the last sectare had carried them far from their usual duties, he thought, but there seemed little to say.

He gestured for Cassi to come assist in the examination—she had returned, unable to find Starbuck—but she seemed distracted, leaning over Sheba with a strange look on her face.

"We've gotta get going," the men told Doctor Salik. He nodded to them.

"Fracking Cylons!" one of them said. They turned to leave.

"Wait!" Doctor Salik cried. "What do you mean?"

"Didn't you hear?" one of the men said, breathless. "They got into the *Galactica*—they're headed for the bridge."

"Yeah, they're getting hold of everyone they see. Lords only know what they're—"

"We gotta go!" the second man cried, tugging on his partner's arm. "Come on!"

There seemed no point in Doctor Salik complaining about another patient to join the horde that had long before overwhelmed him and the rest of the sickbay staff. He looked at the awful wound in B altar's chest.

Salik had never really hated Baltar, their old enemy—not like other people had. Half-heartedly, he moved his med-probe over Baltar's body, and thought about the old man's life. A very sad life and a lonely one, the Doctor thought. He didn't think that Baltar had ever really had a friend.

Maybe things would have gone differently for Baltar—for all of them—if Baltar had been able to accept Adama's friendship. Friends meant everything, Salik thought. He glanced over at Cain's body. Some friends would be lost, soon, he thought.

"Cassi," he said. "Come here, look at this. Most curious." Salik had never seen that sort of readings. Not from a dead man, anyway.

"Give me a moment," Cassi said. "I'm checking Sheba—she's growing unstable, Doctor." In fact, it was a miracle that Sheba was still alive. "Can't stop just now—"

And just like that, Cassiopeia collapsed.

Maybe it was stress, or more likely it was a combination of hunger and pregnancy and stress, the request for a moment of her attention being the final straw on the daggit's back. Whatever it was, one moment Salik had a dead man on his hands, forcing himself to at least give a cursory look—and the next moment he had four critical problems, Sheba, Cain, Baltar, and now Cassi!— As Salik struggled, a small figure entered sickbay. Salik looked over his shoulder and saw the boy, Koren.

"Cassi!" Koren cried, immediately sensing danger.

"What's the matter?"

"She's fainted, Koren. Make sure she's all right, and I'll finish her work."

When Salik got a look at Sheba, he nearly fainted himself. She was completely critical! The bleeding was so profound. In fact, she should have been dead.

But she was clinging to life. He cursed the situation they were in. They had been forced to use traditional transfusions, but Sheba's blood was almost unique. There was nothing left—he couldn't give her his blood. That would kill her. Ordinarily, his stem-cell enhancers would take care of this. Sheba could build her own blood back up, with the help of plasma. But those were long-gone, used up even before that last awful battle.

Salik shook his head, and then he looked over at Cain.

Cain was still in some kind of stasis beyond life and death.

"That's it!" Salik cried, running for the transfusion equipment. Cain's blood!

As he exposed Cain's pale, lifeless arm, he whispered a brief prayer.

Salik was a doctor, and not very religious, but he knew that Cain had been found and brought back for a reason. To save Sheba's life!

As he worked, Koren came up. "Cassi's breathing fine, Dr. Salik," he said.

"Thanks, son. I'll get her a cold compress, and she'll be fine soon enough."

As her father's blood entered her body, Sheba's eyes flickered. "What… ?" she asked, and then suddenly her eyes went wide. "No!"

Sheba, coming awake, was pointing at the door.

A Cylon centurion strode arrogantly into sickbay. His red eye scanned, and he immediately started toward Cassi's limp form.

"I come for the woman," he said in his horrible, mechanical voice.

"Oh no you won't!" Koren cried. He had a gun in his hand— for the life of him Dr. Salik could not have imagined where it'd come from (through the truth was that Koren had taken it surreptitiously only a moment before from Baltar's hand—the very pistol Apollo had gently closed Baltar's fingers around after the Council chamber melee). Koren aimed the pistol at the Cylon, and before the creature could even begin to react, he had blown the Cylon away.

And that was how Koren shot his first Cylon and became a real warrior.

The mob that had gathered on deck six to lynch Apollo not a centon before was still milling about, hoping to scent blood, when the Cylons stormed that section of the *Galactica*.

They got to smell blood, all right.

Their own blood.

Seven Cylon warriors burst into the corridor, armed and battle-hungry, shouting commands.

"Surrender or die!" shouted the Cylon commander.

"Clasp your hands behind your head and form a line in the center of the corridor!"

"*We're going to die*," whispered an old man—the same old man who'd whispered to Apollo as he'd been dragged before the Council.

"Do as they say! Are you trying to get us all killed?"

The old man whacked a Cylon with his cane—unfortunately, Bojay wasn't there to see the senior citizen making good use of his cane. The old man got a Cylon beating for his valiance.

"Stupid human animals," said the Cylon who'd taken the cane blow and administered the beating.

"You will all become slaves!"

"Never," said the old man in a bare whisper.

As the Cylon commander instructed two of his troops to march the civilians to the boarding ship, where they'd begin their life of slavery.

And took his remaining troops to the bridge.

"I can't make sense of this," Tigh told Athena.

"What?" she said, struggling to keep track of the battle. The Vipers had split into two wings. This was incredibly dangerous; the Cylons could go through the weak center and drive straight toward the *Galactica*.

"They've broken through at the hull breach," Tigh said. "We're hearing from the defense squadron—the Security Guards are in retreat." Then Tigh's face changed.

"Athena," he said more slowly, looking at her in horror. "The guard we talked to is alive, but barely. He's trying to make it to sickbay."

"Tigh," she said. "What are you—"

"He said he had seventy men with him down there. The Cylons came in wave after wave. They killed… at least a hundred Cylons… he says. But there were too many. They were overwhelmed. He's only got ten men left. Those who can are headed here."

"Lords of Kobol," Athena whispered.

"I don't think they can make it in time," Tigh said.

"The Cylons are headed here, and fast."

"All right," Athena said, checking her weapons belt. "That's it."

Tigh nodded. "Just you and me."

Pistols at the ready, Tigh and Athena waited.

On the battle screens, the Vipers fought on, but it seemed utterly hopeless.

Microns later, the bridge alarms sounded. The Cylons were at the doors, guns blazing.

Athena and Tigh crouched behind the console, firing in unison at the Cylon intruders.

Dozens of silver centurions fell in the huge firefight—wave on wave on wave of them, fearless and bloodthirsty. In moments parts of the bridge were in smoking ruins.

Then all at once, the Cylons retreated.

"They're regrouping," Tigh told Athena. "Be ready for anything."

"This is the bridge," Athena said. "They won't destroy it. *Galactica* will be useless to them if they do that."

Tigh shook his head, and then his pistol. It was red-hot. "That's assuming they know what they're doing," he said. "I wouldn't ever credit a Cylon for knowing that."

Suddenly, everything fell silent.

Something was flashing on the console. Cautiously, Tigh rose and went to look.

"Athena!" he cried. "There's something new—it's—" But Tigh was halted by a blast from a Cylon centurion who'd barreled into the bridge. The bolt struck him in the thigh and Tigh fell, groaning and firing back at the intruder.

With a great cry, Athena came out, blazing at the Cylons. She took off the head of the one who'd shot Tigh, and the others paused a moment. Then they slunk back behind the bridge doors. Panting, Athena went to Tigh's side.

"I'll be okay," he told her. "Go! Get them!"

Athena rushed forward, and saw, to her complete shock, that a new fleet had joined the battle in progress. These ships were massed behind the Cylons, and they were bearing down fast upon the three battlestars.

The Chitain! They had come, and this time, they weren't fighting alongside the Cylons, they were giving them everything they had—like they were fighting their last stand.

"Don't look a gift Boray in the mouth," Athena said in a low voice.

She watched the Cylon fighters pause. Vipers harried them as the attack halted. The Viper line joined once more—that was it!

Now they were giving the Cylons heavy fire as the Cylon fighter cover turned to protect their rear. And a Chitain wing was coming up on their flank.

"Tigh! It's the Chitain—only they're giving Hades to the Cylons!"

Tigh, groaning, struggled to his feet.

"Tell the Vipers to turn back. It's our only chance."

"Right," Athena said, immediately realizing the opportunity that the Lords of Kobol had given them. It was the barest chance, thinner than any hair on her head, but if the warriors could get back to *Galactica*, they might just manage to get these Cylons off the battlestar and regroup.

"The Chitain," Tigh said. "I wonder what made them decide to—"

But there was no more time for talk. The Cylons at the door were coming in again.

Athena and Tigh crouched together, firing wildly. But their weapons had faith and strength on their side, and once more, the tin cans were driven back.

Still in the thick of the battle, Troy and Trays flew wing to wing.

"I can't believe how many there are," Troy said over the comm.

"More to give my loving attention to!" Trays cried, peeling off and banking, firing on a pair of Cylon fighters.

"Hotshot," Troy grumbled, following his partner. Then his eyes refocused. A whole wing of Cylons was coming at them—it was eight to two.

"Trays!" Troy cried. "Heads up—eleven o'clock." The evil, crescent-shaped Cylons whizzed by, intersecting Troy and Trays' trajectory.

"Frack!" Trays yelled. Troy grimaced as he saw a Cylon bolt glance off Trays' wing. At these speeds, the least thing would cause instability.

Trays spun wildly, his Viper totally out of control. Like vicious flies going for rotten mushies, the Cylons were gathering.

Heart pounding, Troy banked and tried to get behind the Cylons.

"Don't fail me now," he said, as he targeted each of the Cylons in turn. They were stupid, he told himself. They just saw Trays, and they didn't see him. He hoped.

"Fracking Cylons!" Trays cried.

Troy watched as Trays finally gained control of his Viper, but too late. A pair of Cylons were right on him, their lasers intersecting wildly, the deadly, brilliant bolts coming within microns of Trays' wings.

"I'm coming!" Troy called. And he pulled his Viper around, pulling untold G's with the force of it, and from above, flew down on the Cylon pair, blasting them both away, one right after the other.

Troy's comm crackled, but he couldn't make out any words from Trays, just ragged breathing.

"They're gone," Trays said after a moment.

"Yeah," Troy said. He didn't expect Trays to say anything else.

But after a moment, Trays did.

"You saved my life," Trays said. "I owe you… Troy… I owe you a lot." And tough, arrogant Trays' voice was full of real emotion.

"Just remember that the next time—" Troy said, about to say, "the next time you think about messing with Dalton," but he was cut short by an unbelievable sight.

Ship after ship, massing *behind* the Cylon line. Converging on the Cylon battlestars.

"Chitain!" Trays cried.

"You got that right," Troy said. "Only this time, it doesn't look like it's the *Galactica* they're interested in."

Apollo couldn't believe what he saw. An armada of Chitain war vessels, bearing down on them. No, not bearing down on the Viper line, but on the

Cylons!

"Starbuck!" he cried. "Look at that!"

"I see," Starbuck said. "Those bastards—"

"The Cylons are turning," Apollo said. He was right.

As one, the Cylon fighters stopped, hovered a moment, then took tremendous fire as they showed their fleeing, unarmed rear to the Colonial Warriors.

The Colonials wasted no opportunity to pick off as many Cylons as possible before turning for home.

"Tigh and Athena are in big trouble," Apollo told Starbuck. "Let's roll."

The Vipers turned. They were on their way home. A lesser force, but still very great, they saw the ugly Cylon boarding ship attached to *Galactica's* shining white skin like some sort of malformed mechanical leech.

"Let's waste some tin-heads," Starbuck cried as he climbed out of his Viper.

But the boarding ship detached itself and joined the retreat before they could destroy it.

In the launch bay, Apollo and Starbuck quickly grouped the Viper pilots and Colonial Warriors. Apollo didn't need to count heads to see how many had been lost in the battle with the Cylons in the *Ur* cloud. He didn't want to count heads. There'd be time enough for that later.

Troy came running, then Boomer, Bojay, Trays, and Dalton. At least they were there, and two dozen others, all exhausted, all breathing hard, but ready to fight.

"Athena and Tigh are trapped on the bridge," Apollo told them. "It's just us now. The Council Security troops fought—fought hard—"

There were murmurings from the warriors at this, and a few looks of surprise.

Apollo quickly put a stop to that.

"The Cylons are on *Galactica* now," Apollo told them. "Everything that happened, we need to forget. Right now, we've got to clear a way to the bridge, and take control."

"Uh, Apollo," Starbuck said, pointing toward the gantry.

An entire squadron of Cylons was assembling, their rifles at the ready. Their red eyes shone, surveying the launch bay with evil precision. But as always, they were slow—for all of their mechanical accuracy.

Starbuck fired first, taking down their leader with a lucky blast. The bolt struck the Cylon in the chest, hurling him back into the others. In disarray, the Cylons started firing wildly, which gave the warriors valuable time to regroup. A few mechanics remaining in the bay yelled and dove for cover, but one of them, braver than the rest, leapt from behind the empty fuel cell where they were hiding and grabbed one of the Cylon weapons, tossed aside in the first firefight.

"Fracking Cylons!" he screamed, and started firing into the Cylon squadron. Half a dozen Cylons fell before one of their red beams cut the engineer's brave assault short.

"Come on!" Apollo said, seeing that the Cylons appeared confused. "Let's go!"

Waving his arm, directing the warriors, they charged from the Vipers, headlong into the Cylon array.

Soon the bay was filled with smoke and the weird metallic whine of wounded Cylons. A few of the warriors cried out in pain, also, but in the melee, Apollo couldn't be sure who was hurt, or how badly.

The warriors drove into the center of the Cylon force, splitting it. The battle turned to hand-to-hand fighting in such close quarters.

Gar'Tokk the Noman might have thought Boomer was a "small man," but Boomer was more than a match for any Cylon centurion—at least the

average type, and there were none of the advanced centurions among this group. They were the plain silver Cylons, the ones Starbuck called "laser fodder."

Boomer grabbed one Cylon's rifle, ripping it from his metal grasp, and drove its butt into another Cylon who was charging at them. With an awful squeal, the Cylon crumpled on himself in a shower of sparks, filling the air with a choking smoke that smelled like burning plastic.

Starbuck got another Cylon by the arm, and stared in amazement as the robot twisted and pulled, but was wedged between one of his mates and Starbuck. Finally, it pulled itself free—but at the cost of his arm. Starbuck stared at the limb for a micron, then whirled and crowned another Cylon with it. That Cylon reeled away blindly, his red eye temporarily out of commission.

Despite himself, Starbuck had to laugh. But no sooner did he laugh than another Cylon grabbed his shoulders from behind. Starbuck struggled as one of the menacing centurions came at him, wielding a length of metal that he picked up in the fight.

"What, no rifle?" Starbuck wisecracked. "Why don't you pick on a guy your own size?"

Boomer leapt forward just in time, hitting the Cylon with his shoulder and throwing it off balance.

Then Starbuck got his pistol arm free and blew the staggering Cylon away.

The fight was nearing its end—the remaining Cylons, cut off and without support, were no match for the Colonial warriors. Cornered by half a dozen warriors with drawn pistols and grim faces, the few Cylons that remained surrendered, dropping their rifles. They looked almost ridiculous, with their metal arms in the air, red eyes darting back and forth aimlessly.

Starbuck, grinning at the easy victory, turned to look for Apollo. He found him, but Apollo wasn't celebrating.

He was kneeling by an injured Troy, who was groaning in pain, slumped against an empty fuel cell.

Troy had taken a brutal shot to his lower leg. His boot was blackened and smoking.

"Troy!" Starbuck cried, running toward them. Dalton was soon there, too, leaning over Troy with an agonized look on her face.

"Oh, Troy," she said. "How could you have let them do this?"

"Let them?" Troy asked through his pain. She really was the most infuriating—

"Can you walk?" Apollo asked.

Troy gritted his teeth, and with Starbuck and Dalton's help, he got to his feet.

"Yeah," he said, but it was obvious that he needed help. He couldn't put any weight on his left leg at all. Apollo turned to the other warriors. "Starbuck and I will get Troy to sickbay," he told them. "The rest of you, regroup—for now, Boomer's in command. Get to the bridge. Starbuck and I will meet you there as soon as we can."

Boomer stepped forward, and with a nod, took command of the last remaining squadron of *Galactica's* Colonial warriors. "Yes, sir," he said, saluting with great respect.

"But I want to go—" Dalton said, hanging back, looking at Troy with misery in her face.

"I know," Apollo said.

"I'll be all right," Troy said. "It's just a scratch." Starbuck looked at his daughter, smiling. Then he stepped close to her and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Go on," Starbuck told her. "Boomer needs you. I'll take care of Troy."

"All right," she said slowly. Then her pretty face got a hard, determined look to it, and she trotted after Boomer, Trays and the others, checking her pistol as she ran.

Apollo and Starbuck stood on either side of Troy, supporting him carefully, and began to make their own slow way to sick bay.

Centons later, they were at their destination. Starbuck grimaced as he had to kick aside a fallen Cylon centurion in the entrance, jamming the door half open.

"Can't these tin cans clean up their own junk?" Starbuck grumbled.

Despite his pain, Troy laughed. "Starbuck, you can find something funny in anything," he said.

Apollo kept Troy on his feet as Starbuck, grumbling, bent to grab the Cylon's metal boots and drag the carcass out of the way. That job done, he turned and they limped into sickbay to be greeted by an agitated Doctor Salik.

"Apollo! Starbuck!" the Doctor cried. "We were—"

"We're back," Apollo said. "But we can't stay long." The Doctor looked quickly at Troy's ankle. Suddenly all business, he ordered Apollo and Starbuck to get Troy to an exam table immediately.

"This is not good," the Doctor said. "Let me have a look." He immediately began to examine Troy's wound, humming and mumbling to himself.

Apollo spotted Sheba on her couch, and with a cry, ran to her, realizing that she was conscious. Cassi came out, now recovered from the mysterious illness that had struck her when the Cylon had arrived in sickbay, going to help Doctor Salik.

"Cassi!" Starbuck cried, going to her side. "You don't look good—what happened?"

Cassi said nothing, only looking ominously toward the fallen Cylon that Starbuck had so recently hauled out of the way.

At that moment, Koren ran out of the corner where he'd been laying in wait for more Cylons with his pistol.

"Starbuck!" he cried. "And Apollo!"

Apollo got Sheba to her feet and helped her over to the table where they were all now gathered.

"Could a healer have some room?" Doctor Salik said in an irritated tone.

Starbuck and Apollo looked at each other and burst into laughter. Even Troy, in his pain, saw the humor and chuckled.

Apollo looked down at Koren, who was holding the pistol awkwardly against his chest. "Where'd you get that?" he asked Koren. Koren didn't say anything. He pointed at Baltar's body, lying across the bay on a bare exam table.

"Wow!" Apollo said, echoing one of Koren's expressions.

He realized it was the same pistol he'd left in Baltar's hand, and again wondered about fate, and miracles.

"He shot the Cylon," Doctor Salik said in a matter-of-fact tone. "The creature was coming in, menacing Cassi, and this boy just picked up that pistol and—boom!"

"Koren!" Apollo and Starbuck said in unison. The boy blushed and hung his head.

Apollo grabbed the boy's shoulder and drew him close. Looking down at him and smiling gently, Apollo touched his cheek.

"Don't be ashamed, Koren, be proud. You were very brave," Apollo told him. "Somesectare you'll make a fine warrior."

"Shooting tin cans is the number one qualification," Starbuck said. Then, he glanced briefly at Apollo, and decided not to add the wisecrack he'd been planning. Still blushing, but no longer hanging his head, Koren looked up into each of their faces, his young face shining with pride.

"You were great," Sheba told him. "My father will be proud of you, too, when he's better."

Doctor Salik looked sharply at Sheba, but kept his mouth shut. Apollo didn't miss the doctor's expression, however, and looked over at Cain's body.

Doctor Salik shook his head, then he took Apollo aside. Quietly, he said, "I had to use Cain's blood to save Sheba. Cain would not have lived in any case. There's still some shadow of life in him, but—"

Apollo nodded. And again thought of fate and the Gods. Trays and Dalton had found Cain; he was there for a reason. And that reason was Sheba—her life.

Koren hugged Sheba around the waist, and she bent down, stroking his hair.

"Are you all right?" Apollo asked her.

A look of pain crossed Sheba's face, but she smiled a wan smile and nodded. "I'll be fine," she said. "I'm just weak."

"You must rest!" Doctor Salik snapped. Sheba bridled, but the sickbay was his bridge, and here he was the absolute commander.

"Well, have you visited enough? Sheba needs her rest, and so will Troy when I've finished with him."

"But—" Troy said.

"No buts," Doctor Salik interrupted. "Your ankle was severely injured. You won't be going anywhere—not right now, anyway."

Troy struggled to get off the exam table, but the pain was too much. Reluctantly, he nodded at the doctor, telling him to continue with his

examination.

"The doctor's right," Apollo said. "We'd better go. They'll need all the help they can get if we're going to break through to Tigh and Athena." Athena! Apollo could barely think about her trapped on the bridge.

And Tigh… Tigh had already been injured. What if it was just Athena there, by herself, with hundreds of Cylons?

"I want to go," Sheba said. She looked longingly at the pistol that Koren held. It was obvious that she didn't understand, or perhaps didn't want to accept that her father would not recover.

"Me, too!" Koren said.

"Oh, no you don't," Cassi said, gesturing protectively toward the boy.

Koren's face darkened, but then Cassi added, "We need you here. What if more Cylons come?"

Koren's face brightened once more. "Wow!" he cried. "Cassi, you're right!" And he trotted to his corner where he had already set up his little surveillance station.

Doctor Salik wagged his finger at Sheba. "You'll die if you try to run out of here. I suggest you go back to your bed!"

Apollo calmed her with a few quiet words and a kiss on the cheek. Then he and Starbuck said their farewells to Cassi, Troy, Sheba and Doctor Salik. Side by side, they strode off, heading for the bridge and their postponed date with the main force of the Cylon boarding party.

Chapter Thirteen

IBLIS WAS enraged. Enraged! Not only has the Chitain attack taken him by surprise, but their very presence in this place is a shock to him. How dare they hide themselves from him? How could they?

He is unspeakably, unspeakably angry—how *dare* the Chitain attack his fleet? They would pay for their insolence, for their presumption—the Chitain armada will not leave this place. He will exterminate their power and enslave the survivors!

He knows the Chitain. Of course he knows them!

They have been his allies for sectars, and it is in Iblis's nature to study allies and plan for the sectare he must turn against them.

A minor adjustment in plans, in priorities—nothing more.

Iblis issues commands to his fleet, his battlestars, and his individual and collective minions.

And smiles to himself.

The human weaklings will be destroyed in any case. It would be impossible for them to resist Iblis' force, and soon they would turn on each other again, just as they had before.

For a moment, he reflects upon the great pleasure of destroying the human Aron, who had hoped foolishly for some kind of mercy, and reflects further upon the humans' foolish joy at receiving the dead hulk of their idiotic warrior, Cain, who had died for such little purpose. Or—well—nearly died. He might as well have been dead.

Iblis laughs.

He will take physical form again, and soon. Poached Chitain is a renowned delicacy, and he has never partaken of it.

At the limits of their endurance, Starbuck and Apollo, running full speed, reached the warriors at the bridge.

"How bad is it?" Apollo asked Boomer, quickly taking command.

"There's a lot of them," Boomer said in his practical way. "We've got them pinned down, but Athena says they're really pushing to get into the bridge now. I can kind of understand their motive."

Half a dozen warriors had made a makeshift breastworks with furniture dragged from one of the officers' lounges near the bridge, and they were laying down steady, heavy fire in the direction of the gleaming Cylon ranks.

The Cylons had fallen on the warriors' side of the *Galactica*, making a breastwork of their own crumpled and smoking ruined bodies. So, it had become a standoff of sorts. From a distance, neither force could do much, although Cylon heads peaked up over their own fallen comrades from time to time, their gleaming chrome domes and glittering eyes making simple targets for the warrior sharpshooters.

"How many?" Apollo asked Boomer.

"There's least a hundred left," Boomer said grimly.

"They're hunkered down. And I don't think they really know that it's just Tigh and Athena there on the bridge, and their lasers are just about—"

"Don't think that way," Apollo said. He knelt, resting his hands on his knees, breathing steadily and gathering his thoughts. There had to be a way through. The Cylons were effectively trapped—as long as Tigh and Athena held—but that was an uncertain amount of time.

All of a sudden, Apollo stood. "Hold your fire!" he told the warriors at the breastworks. The others gathered around him.

"Be still," he told everyone. "Don't do anything."

"Apollo!" Starbuck said, pointing desperately at the Cylons. "They'll realize we've stopped firing and come charging out at us."

All Apollo did was nod.

Suddenly, Starbuck grinned. With no more words, he joined the other warriors at the breastworks and waited.

It didn't take long. The Cylons moved the bodies of their fallen aside with grim precision. Soon troops of them came marching through the opening, searching with their metal eyes.

"Hold your fire," Apollo said so softly that the warriors could barely hear him.

The Cylons advanced. They were only metrons away now.

"Hold your fire," Apollo said once more.

Then he raised his arm, and lowered it.

The breastworks exploded in a withering web of bright laser blasts, and every Cylon that had advanced was cut down in that single volley.

"It pays to study old military records," Apollo said, as the few remaining Cylons fired wildly in disarray.

"Charge of the Borellian Nomen. Not a single one survived."

"Not this time," came a thundering voice. Apollo turned to see Gar'Tokk and his Nomen companions striding four abreast to the warriors' position.

"Gar'Tokk!" Starbuck cried.

"Your oath is being fulfilled," Gar'Tokk told him. "Join us, Starbuck."

Starbuck looked wildly between Apollo and Boomer, raising his hands in a helpless gesture.

"Join you in what?" Starbuck asked.

"Hunting the metal creatures, Cylons," Gar'Tokk snarled.

Then he and the three Nomen threw back their cloaks to reveal their laser boles.

"This will not take long," Gar'Tokk said.

The warriors watched, astonished, as the Nomen sprang into action. Apollo couldn't believe how fast they moved, despite their enormous height and size.

There were upon the piles of Cylon bodies, and, crouching behind the remains of their enemies, they swung their boles around their heads once, twice, thrice, and released them into the Cylon camp.

The explosions were deafening. The concussion threw the warriors at the breastworks back metrons.

Apollo shrank and covered his ears. None of it seemed to bother the Nomen. No sooner had the smoke begun to clear than they let go another bole volley, with even deadlier precision.

There was no doubting the whines, squeals, and other sounds and signs of vast Cylon destruction.

"That is good," Gar'Tokk intoned, and then he threw back his hood and let out a bone-chilling cry that made the hair on every warrior's neck stand out straight.

Starbuck, seeming to consider something, took off running toward the Nomen. Armed only with his pistol, he crouched and fired into the smoking wreckage of the Cylon assault group.

After a few microns, a form emerged from the cloud of smoke. A single Cylon centurion. Only this centurion wasn't silver, it was made of shining gold. A super-centurion; wily, fast, and the most dangerous enemy ever produced by the Cylon Empire.

He was clearly their leader, but no other Cylon followed. He raised his rifle, and this Cylon's aim was clear.

Laser fire flashed, and one of the Nomen fell, silently.

With another great roar, Gar'Tokk charged. The Cylon fired again before Gar'Tokk could release his boles. With a cry, Gar'Tokk grabbed his arm. But Starbuck was there, in front of Gar'Tokk, protecting him with covering fire.

The Centurion feinted, started again toward them, and without thinking, Starbuck leapt into the corridor, pushing the hulk of a Cylon body into the centurion's way, and rolling twice, getting to his feet and firing into the centurion's midsection.

The centurion was not destroyed, only slowed. It made a terrible, whining noise, but continued on.

Reaching GarTokk, it grabbed the Noman's injured arm and lifted him.

GarTokk struggled. Starbuck leapt on the centurion's back, but it threw him off as if he was the size of Koren.

The other Nomen leapt forward.

With a great roar, GarTokk twisted his body, and with his free hand, grasped the Cylon's metal jaw.

Gar'Tokk's fingers held tight, and with one violent twist, he ripped the centurion's head right off his shoulders. Both centurion and GarTokk landed on the deck with a crash, barely missing Starbuck.

Despite his injured arm, GarTokk stood, lifting his trophy high.

"These creatures aren't much. I have taken men's heads with much greater difficulty," GarTokk said.

Microns passed.

No more Cylons came. Starbuck peered into the gradually clearing smoke. No more Cylons were likely to come. As far as Starbuck could see, there were only sparks, heaps of twisted metal that had once been whole tin cans, and blackened, pitted walls—death and destruction. But as far as Starbuck could see, the remains were one hundred percent Cylon.

It was done. The warriors and the Nomen had won the battle for *Galactica's* bridge.

Together, they rushed through the remains of the Cylon attack force, and pushed through the massive pile of smoking, wrecked metal at the door.

"Apollo!" Athena cried.

She and a wounded Tigh came out from behind the main console to greet all the warriors.

Apollo's heart was ready to explode as he gathered his sister in his arms and held her tight. Tears stung the corners of his eyes as he surveyed *Galactica's* bridge.

It was horribly damaged—a disaster area—but it was still the bridge. And it was theirs once more.

Warrior and Noman alike stood, celebrating, on the now-free bridge of the great Battlestar *Galactica*.

"Athena," Apollo said, stroking her hair.

"I didn't think I'd ever see you again," she said.

"I know," he said. "But the Gods would not allow that."

They joined together, hand in hand, and Apollo turned, holding Athena's arm high.

"Once more, the *Galactica* is free!" he cried. He found it hard to breathe. As he looked from face to face—all the friends he held so dear—he thought that he should say something. After all they had survived, all they'd endured together.

Although the battle still hung in the balance, for this one moment, *Galactica* was its own ship again, and they were all free.

As Apollo began to speak, Doctor Salik arrived on the bridge, holding Koren's hand.

"I have to tell you," the Doctor said. At once, everyone turned to stare at him.

"Tell us what?" Apollo asked.

"Commander Cain—what little life signs I could find—they're fading."

"No!" Apollo cried. Agonized looks went between the friends. So Sheba could live, Apollo thought with sudden clarity. It was the same as it had ever been. Cain had given them precious moments of freedom. And given his daughter a second chance at life.

Still, the doctor waited, but it was Koren who spoke.

"The man who saved you, Apollo—Baltar—he's beginning to wake up."

"Yes," Salik said. "That was my other news. Baltar may recover. He's showing strong signs."

Apollo's eyes grew wide. Cain was gone, but Baltar lived? It made no sense; he couldn't fathom it.

"Lords of Kobol!" Tigh cried. "The old wretch is hard to kill."

Despite themselves, there were more than a few smiles and chuckles around the bridge.

"This is sad news about Cain, Doctor," Apollo said. "But I am glad to hear about Baltar."

Koren looked up at the doctor and tugged his sleeve. The doctor looked down at the boy, distracted, then suddenly addressed the crew once more. "Oh, yes!" he said. "The other reason I came. Koren would like to stay with you for a time."

"He should—" Tigh started to say, but Apollo looked quickly over at Tigh, quieting him.

"Yes, of course," Apollo said. And he knelt, holding out his hands. Koren ran into Apollo's arms.

"Koren's father was a brave man," Apollo said, standing and putting his hand on Koren's shoulder. "We fought. We did not agree. But one thing he said, I want us all to remember."

Everyone listened, leaning forward.

"He believed that every life has worth," Apollo said. "And this is true. Let there be no more nameless, faceless ones among us. No matter what happens, let us remember Jinkrat, and what he stood for. An honorable enemy, and for too short a time—a great friend."

They raised their hands in salute to Jinkrat. Koren put his head against Apollo. Apollo heard the boy struggling to hold back his tears, ashamed to cry in front of *Galactica's* command. Starbuck came close and punched Koren lightly in the arm, making him smile.

"It's okay," Starbuck said. "We're all one big family."

Apollo started to say more, but the radiation alarms began to scream. "Apollo," Tigh shouted, "someone out there just set off an atomic weapon!"

As Apollo turned to face the prow-port just in time to see the blast of light erupt from the smallest of the Cylon battlestars.

"Gods!" said Athena, "are the Chitain mad? Do they know what they're doing?"

"They're Chitain," said Starbuck. "Don't care about much but number one, you know."

"Iblis had them cornered," said Tigh. "You don't want to corner the Chitain."

As they watched, the majestic Cylon battlestar began to drift into the *Ur* cloud, the fireball that consumed it growing, growing——

"Look," said Boomer, "the Cylons are no longer working in concert—either Iblis was on that thing, or the explosion has taken out his ability to command."

It was true: the Cylon fighters were moving utterly without coordination—the Chitain were chewing them up.

In a micron, Apollo remembered Troy's cargo, retrieved from the Cylon battlestar, and Baltar's words.

"Trays! Dalton! Get those Cylon fuel cells launched as far as you can into the Chitain sector," Apollo ordered.

Trays and Dalton sprang into action, running from the bridge.

Breathless, they all watched as the Chitain continued their attack, but the tide of the battle turned once again. Iblis once more seemed to hold sway.

Cornered, the Chitain began to mass.

"What are they doing?" Tigh asked Apollo.

Apollo grimaced. "I think they'd rather destroy themselves than allow the Cylons to prevail."

Tigh shook his head.

"I can't believe it," Athena said. Gar'Tokk drew closer. Apollo held Koren's shoulders as they watched the Chitain ships shrink into a smaller and smaller mass until now they looked like a single star, forming from a cloud of glowing dust.

"Come on," Apollo said. "Come on, Trays. Come on, Dalton."

In a micron, Trays' excited voice came over the comm. "It's done, Commander!" he called.

"Get back—now!" Apollo cried.

"Apollo, we have no idea of the force of the blast—if those Jinkrat, formerly of the *Rising Star*, a ship of hopeless, hapless refugees. Baltar thought about the boy, Koren. He rather liked him. There was an edge of anger and resentment in the child, despite his youth, that Baltar found

appealing. Baltar knew what Apollo saw in the child, but Apollo was as yet young, compared to Baltar's years. He didn't have Baltar's sight.

Baltar didn't suppose he was about to be reelected to the Council of Twelve any time soon. He supposed that if he did recover, he would be sent back to the brig, or worse, put to some "constructive" task. That would be about Apollo's speed.

He wondered if anyone had even cared to say, "Thank you, Baltar, for saving us." Perhaps the boy had.

It was a brave new world, with no place for old men like Baltar in it.

How would he be remembered? As the man who betrayed all of humanity, the man who walked with Cylons? Breathed their air? Communed with them?

How would the people of the *Galactica* remember Baltar? As a hero? Baltar laughed, the pain wracking him. As a villain? Perhaps. Or perhaps, he thought, looking over at Cain, they wouldn't remember him at all.

Did you do all you could, Baltar? He wondered. Wondered until the pain took him again and the dreams returned. Dreams of a new, strange place, and fields to wander. Alone. With not a soul by his side.

EPILOGUE

They found berth in the orbiting drydocks of Paradis, and in those docks they had the fleet remade.

It took sectars—sectars! But in the end, they were sectars well spent.

While the fleet renewed itself, the imam of a local sect called upon Apollo and Athena—there was an ancient book of writings, and it bore the seal of the *Galactica*.

Someone anciently ago left this book for them to read.

Gar'Tokk—who had grown in some unknowable way—told them what it was before they opened it.

It was written in an ancient script they couldn't decipher, but Gar'Tokk knew what it said. "I can teach you to read it if you wish," he said. "Or I can tell you what it says."

Apollo wanted to know what he meant.

"The book is meant for us. It is from the thirteenth tribe. Coordinates that will show us where next we must go. And with those coordinates is knowledge we will need to cope with the challenges that await us there."

Doctor Salik had discovered that bare traces of something that might and might not be life remained in Cain's body. He was neither dead nor alive, but the imam religious leader said this was in the prophecy, too.

They made plans not to bury Cain in space in the traditional *Galactica* ceremony, but to bring him here to this planet, where the imam and his people have prepared a place.

Baltar, hooded, watched as they laid Cain's body to rest.

That day, he had thought to find the boy Koren, perhaps teach him some of the lore of Caprica, but Koren was playing—with other children.

This was a new world, whether brave or not, Baltar did not know.

Apollo asked Baltar to be a teacher.

Baltar had not yet given Apollo his answer. It seemed there was no chance for Baltar to be considered for the Council. It seemed that there was no place for Baltar—at all.

He wished that he could join Cain where he rested. But that was for the future. For the time being, Baltar must wander, and ponder his fate.

In their time on the paradise, Cassi found a midwife whose company she adored.

She was a fine local woman—very wise, it seemed to Cassi.

When the moment came for her to give birth, the midwife helped Cassi to deliver the baby—but in the midst of the birth Cassi blacked out.

When she woke, the midwife and the baby were gone.